

The Red Rays

Killmaster - XLI

Nick Carter

The Red Rays (1969)
(The 41st book in the Killmaster series)
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Dedicated to The Men of the Secret Services of the United States of
America

Chapter 1

I was dreaming about the first man I ever killed.

His name was Serge something or other, and I killed him in an alley in Istanbul. With a knife—I hadn't started using the stiletto yet—and I wasn't much good with a knife. It was messy.

I dream in color, a fact which seems to mean something to Dr. Dorian Saxe, the AXE headshrinker, but doesn't mean a damned thing to me except that the blood is redder and stickier on my hands.

The dream was recurrent, like reading the same book over and over, and now, this early morning in Beirut, in the air-conditioned Hotel Phoenecia, I didn't feel much like going back to bed and the dream. Kezia Newmann, who thought that I thought she was an Israeli agent, was sleeping on her back. Kezia was in her late thirties, still very pretty, and as I stood by the bed watching her sleep I wondered just how much longer she had to live. My guess was not long.

Kezia worked for Shin Bet, all right, but she was also doubling for KGB. Or maybe GRU. No matter. Same firm. AXE had known about her for some time—I think it was Hawk who tipped Shin Bet—and the Israelis were giving her rope and letting her borrow a little time. As I watched her sleep, breathing evenly, with those magnificent breasts rising and falling, I knew I was looking at a woman already dead. Sort of a shame, too, because Kezia was a beautiful gal who went to bed because she liked it, and not just in the line of duty, and knew what to do once she was in bed. I'm not much for introspection—in my line of work it doesn't pay—and no one has ever called me an intellectual, but for just a moment I was tempted to wake the girl and tell her she was well blown and so give her a chance to run for it. But I knew I wouldn't. It was too complicated. There was no place for her to hide. As a blown agent she was no good to the Russians, and Shin Bet would get her sooner or later. Along the way, while she was running, she would inevitably involve a lot of other people and get some of them killed. Maybe even me.

I had no business playing around with her anyway. David Hawk, my august and not too even-tempered boss, would turn blue if he knew. But what Hawk didn't know couldn't hurt Hawk, or AXE, and if I do screwy things now and then—and I do—at least I always know the consequences—and how to avoid them.

I'd come across the line from Syria three days ago, dirty, beat up, and with a few scratches, having just finished a little job in Damascus. After reporting back to Washington, getting cleaned up and drawing some money, I checked in at the Hotel Phoenecia. That night I went to

the Casino just outside of town, lost a few Lebanese pounds and picked up Kezia Newmann. She was pretty well blistered on arak—another reason she was going to die soon—and we went back to the hotel and shortly after her first orgasm she let me know she was an Israeli agent. Christ only knows why! Maybe because she was loaded, maybe to impress me, maybe because she just didn't give a damn anymore.

I was traveling as Silas Lapham, a tobacco buyer out of New Orleans, and getting away with it. I cooked up the phony papers myself and now, as I stared down at Kezia, I remembered Hawk snorting and muttering something about some agents being too literate for their own good. Whatever that meant.

Anyway, Kezia had accepted me as Silas Lapham, tobacco buyer and amiable drunk—I am very good at playing the drunk bit—and seemed, to like me. We stayed close to the hotel and mainly the bed.

I enjoyed myself. When I come off a mission still alive, I like a little booze and a lot of fleshly sin. Sometimes I stick to one woman, sometimes I hop around a little, but the fact is that I usually spend a week indulging myself—what Hawk's generation alluded to as making whoopee—then I cool off and, when I can, spend another week on the farm in Indiana. There I read, and rest, and start getting in shape for the next mission.

There was half a bottle of arak on the table. I had a nip and lit a cigarette and went back to look at the sleeping girl. Sneaky, you know. A sleeping person, man or woman, is so damned defenseless. So easy to kill.

It was only in symbol that I decided to kill Kezia now. There is some of the sadist in me, or I wouldn't be an agent, and as I smoked my cigarette and sipped the arak—not a favorite drink of mine, but she liked it—and watched her sleep and felt the pleasant ache and tension I knew that pretty soon I was going to make love to her and she would wake and that I would in a way, for the moment be welded into her, be one with her and sharing her fate.

But then we would diverge and her death would not be my death. I think that if in that moment I could really, really have saved her I would have tried to help her. But it was impossible. I couldn't help Kezia Newmann. Nobody could.

As I pulled down the sheet and gently slipped in next to her, easy and not waking her, I glanced at the little gold clock on the mantel. Courtesy of the management. It was a quarter of five.

Kezia was waking up. "My God," she said. "My God! My God—what are you doing to me?"

I quoted Ecclesiastes. "There is a time for everything, baby, and everything in its time. Shut up."

She didn't even hear me.

"Yes," she said. "Oh, yes. Ohhhh—yes."

Kezia bit me on the shoulder. Hard. "You've got to stop now," she moaned. "You really must, Sy. I can't stand it! You're a maniac. You're killing me. Stop it. Stop it!"

When I picked Kezia up at the Casino she had what you might call a pseudo-cultured accent. Her English was good—should be, since she was born in Brooklyn, on Flatbush near Grand Army Plaza, and hadn't moved to Israel until she was fifteen—but in bed she lapsed back into Brooklynese. Not words, just accent.

When I didn't stop she started to cry, really on the verge of hysterics now, and stopped moving under me. Her eyes rolled back in her head, with a lot of the white showing. I kept going.

Afterwards neither of us could move for a long time. I lay with my face buried in Kezia's pillow-breasts and began the usual struggle against lethargy and regret, against the calm hopelessness, the PCT—post-coming triste—that saps a man and makes him wonder if anything in the whole lousy world is worth the effort.

I doubt it effects women the same way. I've never been able to find out.

Kezia ran her fingers through my hair—my own now, because I'd gotten rid of the hairpiece I wore in Syria—and said, "You are a monster, darling. A monster!"

Her accent was pure Flatbush. She went on: "I have never in all my life had anything like that! Sweet Christ!"

I admitted modestly that I was pretty good.

Kezia stared up at me with narrowed eyes. "Good? My God—you are tremendous, man! Honestly, Sy, I never believed it could be like that. Honestly. My God—you must have to beat them off with clubs."

I was coming back now. I thought of the Luger and stiletto in the false bottom of my suitcase and remembered that I hadn't cleaned the Luger yet. Careless of me. I would get to it first thing—as soon as I extricated myself from this pleasant little net of flesh I had woven, and that was now beginning to be something of a bore.

I waited for the phone to ring. Nothing. No knock on the door. Yet. But I still had the hunch. I knew.

When I finally summoned enough strength to roll out of bed, Kezia caught at me and gave me a little kiss and a squeeze. "You take good care of that, Sy. I've come to love him. I wouldn't want anything to happen to him."

"Nor I," I told her as I went into the bathroom. "Nor I."

I was out of the shower and toweling when the knock came on the door. Kezia was asleep again and I tried not to wake her.

In my business you don't just throw doors wide open and greet

people with wide spread arms. I whispered, "Who is it?"

"Cablegram for Mista Silas Lapham." The English was slurred by a genuine Lebanese accent.

I opened the door. "I'm Mr. Lapham."

I gave the boy some coins and he handed me the buff envelope. It had to be from Hawk. He and Delia Stokes, his confidential secretary, were the only people who knew where I was—and who I really was.

The boy didn't leave at once. He was a pert little character with a sort of smart-aleck grin, and he kept looking past me into the room. They grow up fast along the Levant and I figured that the kid was looking at the sleeping Kezia—I only had a room, not a suite—and getting some juvenile kicks and thinking bad thoughts. I didn't want to be a party to inflaming his minor's imagination and have him ending up in the basement practicing the secret sin, so I gave him a gentle shove.

"Okay, kid. Thanks. Out."

He lingered, still staring into the room past me, and I saw that he was looking at the TV set and not at the bed.

"Your TV not work okay either, mista?"

I must have looked as baffled as I was, because he went on to say: "All TV, all over world, is gone to hell, mista. You not knowing?"

I shrugged and steered him firmly out the door. "I am not knowing. Now beat it."

He beat it. I closed the door and took the cable into the bathroom, wondering what in hell that had been about. All TV all over the world is gone, to hell?

My first inclination was to give three rousing cheers and draft a letter of congratulation to whoever, or whatever, had succeeded in bolluxing up TV all over the world. I am not much of a devotee of the boob tube. Hawk is, though he will never admit it.

To hell with it. I hadn't looked at TV for weeks. I hadn't read a newspaper in three days. With Kezia around I am going to read or look at the idiot box?

The cablegram read: Model T Woof-Woof-First-Musty—

There was no signature. There didn't have to be. It was from Hawk—who else?—and it meant that the firm was back in business again, right now and without delay.

Over the years, working in such close liaison, Hawk and I have evolved our own personal code. Not to be found in the official code books. I never carry a code book anyway, because that is asking for trouble.

I doubt that another Killmaster—there are three others, as I happen to know (Hawk doesn't know I know)—I doubt that he could have decoded the cable. I did it without conscious thought as I started

to shave.

Model was nothing—a makeweight word inserted to balance and deceive. T Woof, the second woof being superfluous, meant Thomas Wolfe. The novelist. First meant Wolfe's first book.

Thomas Wolfe's first novel was *Look Homeward, Angel*.

Musty meant urgent, now, at once, do it yesterday. An old newspaper term.

Hawk wanted me in Los Angeles right away.

Kezia was sleeping like an exhausted baby as. I gumshoed around and collected my few things. I always travel as light as possible. I don't need much in my line of work: the Luger, a few spare clips, the stiletto in the arm sheath, sometimes a few bits and pieces of disguise such as hair, spirit gum, padding and contact lens, things like that. Mainly I rely on "natural" disguise—the way I walk and talk and carry myself—and only on rare occasions do I resort to the rubber and plastic gimmicks. I don't need them. Along with being a highly trained and efficient assassin I'm a natural mime. It comes in handy.

Kezia didn't wake up. I left a stack of money on the dresser and avoided looking at her as I closed and locked the door behind me. That was over. Forget it. I knew I was right about her, and would have bet a thousand dollars against a Lebanese pound, about thirty-three cents, that I would never see her alive again. But as I walked down the corridor to the elevator I admitted to a creepy feeling. It was as though I had just made love to a beautiful, and animated, corpse. Soon to be. I did have a creepy feeling. Necrophilia is not my bag.

I spotted him as I waited for a taxi to take me out to the airport. I have a good memory—not total recall, not a photo mind, or, anything like that—but good. I've trained it. And two or three times a year I spend a week going through the AXE files in Washington.

He was lounging about in the parking lot over the way and making conversation with the attendant. A big man in one of those drab and badly cut suits they always wear. His name was Nikolay Tovaretz and he was a sub case officer, an underling for the rezident on the Beirut rezidentura. I didn't know who was the top KGB man in Beirut at the moment, but I knew Tovaretz. He was a killer. Mostly with his hands, as I remembered the file, and mostly women. I had grabbed a stack of newspapers on the way through the lobby, but now I ignored the screaming headlines and watched Tovaretz. He did have big hands.

His glance slid past me without interest. I was wearing my Silas Lapham suit, my horn rims, my stoop and corn-fed half-drunken manner. I knew there would be no bars open this early, so before I left the room I had a couple of araks to get the smell on my breath. It was only a few minutes after seven and I was already half blasted.

My taxi came and I piled in. So they were watching Kezia

Newmann around the clock. I wondered for how long, then forgot it. There was no way of knowing. They hadn't spotted me or I wouldn't be riding to the airport now.

There was nothing I could do. Absolutely nothing. I knew that I had been lucky again—luck usually runs with me—and that my timing had been just right. Hawk's cable had come at the right time. I had cut out, alone, at just the right time. If I had hung around a few more hours, taken Kezia out to lunch, or dinner, or remained to do some more screwing, I could well have ended up in a hell of a mess. Another one of those by-the-skin-of-the-teeth things and I took enormous pleasure in thinking about it.

I still hadn't read the Paris edition of The New York Times when we got to the airport. I was flying TWA and I made it with a minute and a half to spare. I rolled the papers into a bundle on my lap and as the plane climbed and banked, watched the snow glint on the Dar-el-Beider mountains to the northeast. The blunt peaks grew larger and I realized that the plane was going to make a sweep over Baalbek. It was a tourist thing, a sometimes courtesy gesture, in the hope that you would forget about delayed flights, air conditioning that didn't work, and burned steaks. I had seen Baalbek. In fact, I had had Baalbek. The closest I ever came to being killed in the line of duty was one night in the temple of Jupiter. I opened the roll of papers.

The kid had been so right Somebody—and no one seemed to know exactly who—was raising hell with TV all over the world.

The kid had said: "All TV, all over world, is gone to hell, mista."

The Times, that good gray lady, was a bit more restrained. They hadn't broken out the end-of-the-world type, and the head was only four-column, but excitement was there.

MASSIVE BLACKOUT OF WORLD TV;
ALL CHANNELS INTERDICTED BY RED
PROPAGANDA. PRESIDENT URGES CALM
Scientists Suspect Lasers But Decry
Outer Space As Source; Billions Lost;
Baffled UN Takes Emergency Measures

I read the lead in the story. Somewhere, in the world a powerful TV transmitter was blanking out all other programs and superimposing its own. The Chicoms were doing it. They admitted it, but with a difference. These were new Chinese Reds. They were dedicated to the extinction of the old order of Reds in China. They called themselves Neo-Coms. New Communists.

The Neo-Coms were not transmitting from China. The location of their transmitter was their secret and they weren't telling. Yet. But

they would tell, in time. When Mao was out and they were in—and when the Chinese, the Neo-Com Chinese, were admitted to the United Nations and all was cozy and comfy and everybody was buddy-buddy.

All in good time. The world would see the light. Meantime the secret TV transmitter would continue to dominate all channels, whenever they wished, and you either watched and listened to the Neo-Com line or you turned off the boob box and forgot it.

The beautiful part, the gorgeous gimmick, from their viewpoint, was that the Neo-Coms were using our satellites, and the Russians', to bounce their laser rays, or masers, or whatever, around the world. There was no way of tracing the home transmitter. It might be at the North Pole, in Timbuctoo, or just outside Gnawbone, Indiana.

I skimmed the stories, smoking cigarettes at a great pace, and kept my eyes off the blonde stewardess in the mini-uniform. At the moment I had no great interest in legs and fannies, no matter how spectacular. I was back in business, working again, even though I had not seen Hawk. Los Angeles is the television capital of the United States. I expected that Hawk would meet me there. He would have orders for me. QED. I was in it.

I couldn't, at the moment, see the AXE angle, where we fitted in, but I didn't let that bother me. This was a political setup, never mind new or old Chicoms, and the TV bit was nothing but blackmail.

AXE would fit in somewhere. And AXE would get the dirty job, as always. Me. Killmaster.

I dropped the papers and relaxed, smoking. The thing had its humorous angles. The ratings, for one thing, were pretty good among males the world over. When they could sneak a look. The Neo-Coms were staging some pretty hot stag shows on the miniature screen.

And no commercials!

There was the propaganda, of course, but nothing is perfect. I found myself chuckling and the old biddy across the aisle looked at me with suspicion. I gave her my best smile and winked. She stuck her nose in the air and sniffed.

The stewardess bent over me, tender and solicitous, inquiring if I wished a drink and permitting me a glimpse of a pink bra. I thought of Kezia for a moment and wished I hadn't.

I decided to sleep a little. Planes always make me drowsy. As I drifted into the mist I wondered if Tovaretz would screw Kezia before he strangled her. Sometimes the Russian muscle boys play that way.

Chapter 2

From Kennedy Airport I taxied to the penthouse on East 46th Street. I needed a change of suits and some clean shirts. Silas Lapham was dead now, again, and I hoped W. D. Howells wasn't spinning too hard in his grave. The square suit could go to the Salvation Army, though I doubted there would be any takers even there.

After I bathed and shaved I went through the mail. Mostly junk addressed to occupant. A couple of billets-doux that I tore across and tossed in the fireplace. Old romances are best forgot.

I had a Scotch and dressed, choosing a very light gray cheviot from Savile Row that cost me a lot of devalued pounds. I went into the study and made out my last report to the Acme Factoring Company, Park Row, New York City, N.Y., thus winding up the Syrian case and getting me out of the tobacco-buying business. I always file two reports—one for the official AXE file and one for Hawk. His is the only one that really counts.

On my way to La Guardia I broke trail a couple of times just in case—it gets to be a habit after the years—and checked back to see if anyone was interested in me. Nobody was. At the airport I picked up the latest editions of the Times, Daily News and Post, all we've got left in this sad city, and took them on the plane with me.

I've worked out of L.A. a number of times, and the routine was familiar. I made a phone call and a Blue Star taxi picked me up near an entrance to Pershing Square. I recognized the driver, a rough-looking character named Wells, wearing a food-stained plaid shirt and a thickish brown beard. He didn't let on that he had ever seen me before.

When the taxi pulled up I waited until he flashed his Off Duty sign on, then strolled up. I said: "A house is never a home, is it?"

He came right back with the Gilbert and Sullivan bit. "Well, hardly ever, sir." I nodded and got in.

I could have walked in half the time but the taxi part is SOP. So you do it. I waited until he had driven around the block a couple of times, watching his mirror, and then cut down to Main. When he was sure we weren't being tailed, Wells headed for the Bunker Hill neighborhood. We've got the whole top floor of one of the new apartments, the Ormsby Arms. A pretty good setup. Nothing overlooks it and you don't have to worry about snipers. (See Nick Carter: The Red Guard)

"You're to go to 9C and wait, sir. I'll give you the key when we make change."

I hauled out my bag and gave him a fiver and got the proper change and a key. I gave him a buck tip and watched his face. Dead pan. "See you," I said, and turned away. He didn't even grunt.

Hawk was already in the apartment. Sitting in the dark watching TV. I latched the door behind me and spoke to the shadow in a corner. "We alone?"

Any time, any place in the world, you can recognize the way Hawk gargles around a cigar.

"For now," he said. "A couple of people coming in later. Sit down and watch this, son."

When he calls me son he's in a fairly good humor. I shoved my bag into a corner, loosened my tie, took off my jacket, lit a cigarette and built a drink from the little bar I remembered from my last visit. Hawk kept quiet. I kept quiet. And got my first look at what the Neo-Coms were doing to world television.

The picture was clear and sharp, in black and white. The shot was a full closeup showing a Chinese devil mask, a grotesque and horrible thing that carried an eerie impact as it thrust into the room. The voice was that of a woman speaking precise and beautiful English. It was a trained voice, a professional voice, but it was evident that she was reading from a script.

"Once more we must apologize, world, for breaking into your television programs. We hope we do not cause too much inconvenience. But it is necessary that we do this so that we can bring you our message—the message of the new China, the China that will be, as soon—and this is very imminent now—as soon as the outworn and stultified regime of Mao Tse-tung is overthrown—"

I slid into a big leather chair and sipped my drink. "Chiang Kai-shek?"

"Wrong," said Hawk out of his shadow. "We thought of that first off. Now shut up and watch."

The devil mask was animated now, moving from side to side, tilting and grimacing. A woman's hand, slim and beringed, holding a cigarette that had just been lit, came into view. I couldn't resist.

"I knew it couldn't last, sir. Here comes the commercial."

Hawk didn't think it was funny. "Shut up, damn it! Listen to this voice—it's going to be important"

I shut up. You can only push the old man so far.

The dainty hand put the cigarette to the mouth of the devil mask and blew smoke into the room. Cute effect. 1949 vintage. I was still expecting the spiel about low tar content when the voice went on:

"Do not be afraid of this devil mask, world. It is only a mask, and masks are harmless things. Inanimate lumps of matter that cannot harm anyone. But behind the masks are real people, people much like

yourselves, loyal and patriotic Chinese who have determined to risk their lives and fortunes, and those of their friends and loved ones, to bring China into her rightful position in the world.

“So for the time being, until Mao is overthrown and we are admitted to the United Nations as an equal, we must wear the masks. We beg your forbearance. We are as anxious to show our true faces as you are to see them. In the meantime we will try not to interfere with your regular programs any more than is absolutely necessary, and when we do come on your screen we hope you will find our programs interesting and stimulating.

“We ask your understanding and cooperation. Write! Write your President, your Senator, your Congressmen. Write your newspapers. Demand that we, the Neo-Communist government in Exile, be granted a seat in the United Nations and on the Security Council. Only you can do this! But it can be done. It must be done if the world is to be spared the horrors of atomic war. For make no mistake—atomic war is what Mao and his cronies are planning for the world. Write. Act. Today!”

There was a great swirling of smoke on the screen and the devil mask began to pan back and to the side. Fadeout in a muted booming of gongs.

The big eye stared at us for a moment, pale and sicklied o’er, then sound came drumming into the room. Sound but no video.

“You got that blouse clean in cold water? Nonsense. It isn’t possible.”

“But, mother, I tell you that—”

The commercial cut off and the image of a newscaster grew on the screen. He was being very calm and matter-of-fact and his hair piece was a beauty. He let us know that the President had just called a special joint session of Congress. Hawk snapped off the TV set. He turned on the ceiling light and stood looking at me, rolling a beat-up cigar around in his thin mouth. As usual his expensive suit looked as if had come off the peg at the Kollege Klothes Shoppe, and his shirt was wrinkled and soiled. The tie was a disaster. But he didn’t look as tired as he usually did. He looked bright and alert and almost happy and his iceberg-gray eyes were snapping as he said:

“And what do you think of them apples, son?” Someday, when I am old and tired and full of time, I am going to write a book trying to explain why Hawk talks the way he does.

Now I smiled and he smiled back and I knew that he really was in a good humor. I knew more than that—Hawk was on top of this thing already. He wasn’t feeling around in the dark. I didn’t understand it. Just one of the million things I didn’t understand about this case. Or mission.

In a few short and pithy sentences I explained to Hawk just how

deep in the quandary I was. He smiled and nodded and actually rubbed his hands together. He fixed us drinks at the little bar and looked at his watch.

“Preston Mohr and Bill Phelan will be here soon. Sit down and listen, son. I’ll zero you in as much as I can. And take that doltish look off your face—this mess is not really as bad as it looks. We got a break—one hell of a fine break.”

“You delight me,” I told him. “I am glad that someone is able to make sense out of this game of cat’s cradle. I can’t. I’ve been boning up on this ‘next voice you hear’ bit ever since I left Beirut, and I am now expecting Superman any minute.”

Hawk sat down, crossed his skinny legs, pulled an ashtray close to him and gummed his cigar. He hadn’t shaved this morning and I noticed how white his stubbie was. He never tells anyone his age, and I wasn’t about to ask, but I figured he must be well into his seventies. The story around Washington is that the President had personally pleaded with Hawk to stay on after retirement age. The story is probably true. The old man looks like a rube, the original hayseed, a real hick from Horner’s Corner, but that is all window dressing. A lot of good, high-ranking enemy agents are dead because they figured Hawk for a sap. The old man is the best, in the toughest racket in the world, and that says it all.

“First,” he said now, “is how we fit into this deal. You must be wondering.”

I told Hawk that I couldn’t see where assassination came into this picture.

“It doesn’t. Not just yet. I think it will before long. But let me try to tell you in, in proper sequence, so you’ll know heads from tails. First there is money. Money! Remember the old saw about money talking?”

I did. It does.

Hawk nodded and his grin was sour. “Well, now money is screaming. Big money. The TV people, the whole damned complicated complex lot, including Wall Street and little old ladies that own one share of stock, they are all yelling and putting on pressure. Billions have been lost already, billions more are going down the drain unless we can stop this thing and stop it fast. And that is just for openers.”

“Some openers,” I admitted. It wasn’t hard to see the handwriting on the wall. Short of dropping an atomic bomb on Detroit it would be hard to figure a better way of knocking out the American economy than to tap the TV industry.

“That’s first and highest priority,” Hawk said. “Stop it.”

I lit a new cigarette off my butt. “I agree, sir. I still don’t see how AXE gets into it—unless you already know who we have to kill to stop it?”

"I don't," he said. "I don't have the faintest idea, yet, who you will have to kill, Nick. But it is a fair bet that there will be killing. Because we have a clue, a faint indicator, of where this television transmitter is. We can be wrong, though I hope not. But what I have to do, Nick, is to put you onto a trail and let you follow it and see what happens. If I'm right and the trail leads you to the transmitter, you will be, as usual, on your own. Your orders are, as of this moment, to destroy that transmitter and any person who tries to interfere with you in the performance of your duty."

Ice tinkled as I raised my glass to drink. So here we went again. Another mission. Another hell raid, as Hawk called them, with me betting I could raise more hell than the opposition.

I sighed. "Okay, sir. Where is this transmitter?"

"We think—think, mind you—that it's in Peru."

I wasn't at all fazed. Not much does faze me anymore. Why not Peru? Why not the South Pole, for that matter?

"Any idea where in Peru, sir?"

"Not much—other than someplace in the high Andes. Very high. That is one reason the transmitter can do such a job of blacking out everything. That and the fact that they are using laser beams to broadcast their programs—that gives them a sort of superhighway of communications, so an expert tells me, and we, or anyone else in the world, have nothing that can counteract it. My expert tells me that we have known about laser telecasting for a long time, in theory. But these Neo-Coms are doing it. We can't match them. Answer—destroy them."

I sipped again. "If you can't join 'em, whip 'em?"

"You got it, son." Hawk peeled the cellophane from a fresh cigar, spat his old one into the ashtray and started gumming.

I got up and went to the window and stared out over the city toward Hollywood. I was suddenly restless and wanting to get on with it. There was still a lot of briefing to sit through, of course, and I was impatient to get it over with. I turned back to Hawk, who was regarding me with narrowed cold eyes as he dry-smoked his cigar. He had hardly touched his drink.

"How soon do I start for Peru? What cover am I using?"

"I can't tell you that, son. Not yet. Maybe tomorrow. Or it might be days yet. Maybe never."

I stared at him, but kept my mouth shut. He can be like that sometimes.

Hawk spoke softly. "I said I was going to put you onto a trail, Nick. That trail starts right here in Los Angeles. In Hollywood, to be more precise."

I looked out the window again. There was a break in the

shimmering smog now and I could just discern the barren Hollywood hills.

“Leave us by all means be precise,” I told him. “Where in Hollywood? How soon? How about some details? I don’t work very well blindfolded.”

Hawk didn’t answer me. He flicked on the TV again and went back to his chair. The picture took form. No Neo-Coms. The UN in session, with the Russians and the United States in complete agreement that the maverick TV transmitter must be found and disabled. Complete agreement. I now believed in miracles.

Hawk looked disgruntled and turned off the set. He had his heart set on the Neo-Com programs. I gave him a nasty-little grin.

“Disappointed? No feelthy peectures?”

Hawk ignored the crack. “They do show some stag films,” he said. “Late at night. I suppose that’s so they won’t corrupt the kiddies.” He was playing it straight.

I recognized his mood and didn’t point out the time factor. The parents of British, French, Russian, German, Swedish—and so on and so forth—kiddies would just have to cope as best they could. I had an idea, from my reading, that the stag films were pretty explicit, with everybody doing everything to everybody, and not much worrying about who was paying for it.

My own solution, had I been a parent in such dilemma, would have been an axe well applied to the TV set. I wondered how many of them did that.

Hawk talked about nothing for a time, the way he does when he clams up—with him this usually means that he wants you to hear it from someone else—and in about ten minutes there was a sound of a key in the front door and a couple of men came in.

One of them, Preston Mohr, I had met before when I was working on the Hungarian mission. He was one of the top directors in Hollywood, and at that time I suspected he worked for AXE. Now I knew for sure.

The other guy, Bill Phelan, I had heard of but never met. He was CIA, a big man with a gut on him and a bald head. He nodded at me and didn’t offer to shake hands. Preston Mohr remembered me. He shook hands and murmured some pleasantries, then went to sit in a corner and stuff a pipe.

Bill Phelan didn’t waste any time getting nasty. After giving me a long, icy scrutiny—his look said that he knew all about me—he turned to Hawk and started complaining. I could sympathize with the man in a way—he looked haggard and frustrated and he needed sleep. I didn’t know his title, but he was high enough in CIA that this mess must be bugging the hell out of him.

At first he did try to be polite. He said: "I don't understand, sir. Why bring Carter in on this? I—er—don't think it's that kind of a job. Not yet, anyway."

Hawk gave him a bleak look. "I think it is. I sent for Nick. He is in on it. I have presidential authority for it, in case you want to check. Do you?"

Phelan looked confused. Preston Mohr coughed out a stream of pipe smoke. Hawk gave me a hard look that said that that would be enough.

Phelan gave me another nasty look, wiped his face with a dirty handkerchief, then ignored me. He opened a briefcase and took out a batch of papers that looked like blueprints, thin, white-lined schematics of some sort. He handed them to Hawk.

"There's no doubt, sir. These voice graphs prove it. The woman who speaks on the Neo-Com programs is Rona Matthews. She's in Los Angeles now, or rather she's at her beach house near Malibu, so what we have been hearing must be tapes."

Hawk was staring down at the schematics, turning them over and over in his hands. I watched him, very much interested. AXE isn't a technical outfit, but we use the best of the modern gimmicks. We keep up. If you don't you're out of business tomorrow. But I couldn't remember ever having used voice prints before for positive identification. The truth was that I was a little hazy about the technique involved.

Phelan handed Hawk another sheaf of papers. "This is the complete file on Rona Matthews, sir. My Orders were to hand it over to you." His tone said he would have preferred to drop dead first.

Hawk said thank you and looked expectant, still not satisfied.

"What about this Li Tzu? This guru, or yogi, sadhu, whatever you call him? What have you got on him?"

Phelan looked like he was being tortured, and I understood what Hawk had done. It was typical of him. He had gotten to The Man first and sold AXE as the top dealer in this case. He now had the authority, and he was milking the CIA of every drop of their hard-won intelligence. Everyone else, too, for that matter. Hawk was in the jaybird seat and could command information from the FBI, Secret Service, State and Treasury—you name it and Hawk could get it.

Phelan, his face contorted as though he were in actual physical pain, said: "He calls himself a lama, sir. He's Tibetan, you know. Li Tzu is with Rona Matthews now, sir. At the beach house. Matthews is giving a party tonight, I understand, to introduce the lama to a new group of people. We thought it might be a good chance to infiltrate, to start the ball rolling. In fact we have gone so far as to—"

Hawk had been stripping a fresh cigar. He rolled the cellophane

into a ball and flipped it at the wastebasket. He missed.

"You need practice," I told him.

He gave me a gelid look, but his eyes were colder when he turned back to Phelan. "I know how far you have gone. Thank you for everything. I'll take it from here. But there are two things I must be absolutely sure about—that the girl understands her orders, and that the local police have been advised and have agreed not to interfere. What about it?"

Phelan looked so miserable that my heart almost bled for him. Almost.

"That is taken care of, sir. The girl understands that she is temporarily working for AXE and that she is to take orders from you or from your deputies and inferiors."

That inferior was no accidental choice of words. I didn't let it pass.

"You're taking an awful chance," I told Phelan. "You might lose this operative. Once she works for an outfit that knows its ass from third base she might never come back to you."

He sputtered, opened his mouth, looked at Hawk and thought better of it and closed his mouth. Hawk pointed his cigar at me. "Kindly shut up, Nick." His tone was sweetly reasonable.

The cigar swiveled to cover Phelan. "And the local police?"

"Taken care of, sir. They have promised not to interfere and not to answer any emergency calls from the beach house tonight—short of murder or rape, of course."

Murder and/or rape? They weren't in the cards. It wasn't that kind of case. First off, we at AXE don't call it murder. We call it just what it is—killing the enemy in the line of duty. Doing it to them before they do it to you.

Rape? I suppose there have been rapes committed by AXE men. We use a lot of agents, and in this business you get all kinds. I have never heard of such a case and at the moment I didn't give it a second thought. Maybe I should have. You should always read the fine print in any contract you sign with the devil.

Hawk and Phelan went to a corner and whispered. I got into a casual, off-the-cuff chat with Preston Mohr, who all this time had been making like a mouse with a bad case of felinophobia. I told him how much I had enjoyed his last picture, which was the truth. He said that I was very fine and fit, which I doubted was true, because I was beginning to feel a little beat-up as reaction set in from the Syrian thing and Kezia Newmann. I wondered again if the Russian would bang her before he killed her?

To break away from that line of thought I said, "Rona Matthews? That name should mean something to me. But what?"

Mohr sucked at his pipe before he answered. Hawk and Phelan

were still whispering in the corner and I tried to figure what it was that Hawk didn't want me to know yet. I was still way out on a limb. What did Rona Matthews and some Tibetan lama by name of Li Tzu have to do with the Neo-Coms and a pirate TV transmitter? I didn't have a clue. The voice prints didn't help much— even if they were reliable.

"Old movie star," Preston Mohr said. "One of the first of the sex pots. Still a Sex pot, if what I hear around town is true. I haven't seen Rona in years except to say hello at a party or a premiere, something like that. She must be in her sixties now, Looks forty. And can't get enough, from the tales they tell. And Hollywood tells, believe me."

Just then, as I looked at Preston Mohr, I was remembering Rona Matthews. Her mouth—how wide and red and moist, how inviting, it looked on the screen. As I recalled she had had little-girl breasts and legs that were almost too slim, but there had been something about that mouth—

"She hasn't made a picture in twenty years," Mohr said. "Hasn't needed to, of course. She isn't exactly starving. Still got the first nickel she ever made, from what I hear, thanks to Dion Hermes."

I must have looked as baffled as I was, because he pointed his pipe stem at his belly and laughed. "Sort of gets you right here, doesn't it? Dion Hermes isn't his real name, of course. It's Theophilus Demeter. Chicago Greek. His old man ran a candy store on the corner of Clark and Oak."

I knew then why Hawk had clammed up. He wanted Preston Mohr to tell me all this. Hawk has a theory that the closer to first hand you get information, the more valid it is likely to be. And the fact that Mohr was talking so freely, and knew so many details, was the tipoff that he was AXE. As I had suspected. I let it go at that. We don't go around giving the sign and the grip, and wriggling our ears at each other.

I smiled at Mohr. I'd liked him the first time we met on the Hungarian thing.

I said: "Stop me if I've got a nasty mind, but Dion Hermes? Is it what I think it sounds like?"

He laughed again, in low key. "Afraid so, Nick. Dion, I think, is the diminutive of Dionysus. Hermes speaks for itself. But he doesn't swish. He looks pretty straight, as a matter of fact, and he is one hell of a smart cookie businesswise."

I nodded. "And he is responsible for Rona Matthews not ending up in the derelict actors home?"

Across the room, cater-corner from us, Hawk and Phelan were still going at it in whispers. Phelan was looking outraged again, and I knew the old man was slipping the shiv to him.

“Uh-huh,” said Mohr. He crossed his legs and took out a packet of expensive Dutch tobacco and refilled his pipe. As an old tobacco buyer I should have recognized the mixture, but I didn’t. “My part in this,” Mohr went on, “is nearly over. I did the file on Matthews and Dion Hermes, and snatched some old tracks of Matthews’ voice for comparison with the voice graph the CIA made of the woman behind the devil mask. I have, in fact, been working in close liaison with the CIA, on Mr. Hawk’s instructions.”

That had an odd sound to me. I called him sir, never mister.

“Mr. Hawk asked me to fill you in, Nick. Evidently he thinks you won’t have time to study the files.”

“That could be,” I acknowledged. “I get the idea that this thing is going to take off like a rocket. So shoot it to me. How do Rona Matthews and this Dion Hermes tie into the TV thing? I know about the voice print, but pretend that I don’t. Start from scratch. Who the hell is Li Tzu, apart from being a Tibetan lama, and how does he get into the picture? And I suppose that if Rona Matthews is tied in with the Neo-Coms, then our boy Dion is too? Explain that to me. What is a woman like Matthews doing mixed up with a queer?”

Mohr’s pipe was out again and he lit it with a kitchen match. That’s one of the things I’ve got against pipes. They won’t stay lit. And they burn my tongue.

He stoked away for a minute, then let the pipe start to go out again. He said: “Let me try to give it to you in some sort of proper sequence, although that won’t be easy. This is sort of a complex deal. Screwy, you know. Strictly Hollywood, though I doubt you could sell the script. Too implausible.”

I said I understood that. I did, too. Los Angeles and environs has more nuts to the square inch than any place in the world.

“This Dion Hermes,” said Mohr, “has probably been queer from the time he was in kindergarten. He left Chicago at a tender age, probably by invitation, and tried to make it out here as an actor. Being a faggot wouldn’t necessarily be against him, not if he was discreet. And he has been discreet.

“Anyway, he didn’t make it as an actor. No talent. And somehow or other he met Rona Matthews and they hit it off—”

I interrupted to say that I still didn’t get that.

Preston Mohr looked a bit disappointed in me and, though he was too polite to say it, his glance indicated that I was an innocent wandering in Sodom.

“You couldn’t be expected to know, of course. Rona Matthews is bisexual. She likes men and women. Or did. I don’t know what the score is right now. Anyway, the two of them got along, he took over as her agent and business manager, and the combination prospered. In

more than a financial way. This is all gossip, of course, and hearsay, but I imagine it's pretty close to the truth. Rona Matthews and Dion Hermes worked out a ploy— nothing particularly new about it— where they worked as a team. She got boys for him and he got girls for her. He was a good-looking man, still is, and as I said he doesn't swish. There is nothing of the flaming bitch about him. So he never had any trouble getting girls—for the first date or two, anyhow. Then Rona, when she was on the Lesbian kick, would move in and try her luck while Dion had a go at her boy friends. I would guess they made a pretty slick team and ran up a good score."

I wanted another drink but decided against it. Hawk sees more than he lets on, and while the stuff never bothers me, enough is enough. The old man was steering Phelan toward the door now and I knew that with the CIA out of the way we would be getting down to cases.

"They've been together a long time," Preston Mohr was saying. "Rona and Dion have. He turned into a pretty good writer, amazingly enough, and did some of Rona's screenplays. And he did one really excellent novel, as I recall. Under a pseudonym, of course."

I said that I could understand that. Dion Hermes, on a book jacket, would attract a very select audience. But not a large one.

"One wonders," said Mohr, "why two people like Rona and Dion stay together so long. Other than money, of course. There must be something else—a sort of love that the average person can't understand. I've often wondered about them. The thing intrigues me. A homosexual man and a bisexual woman together for twenty years! I'm surprised they haven't married."

He was dreaming off on a tangent and I knew then that he was no Killmaster. Not even in the action division. Preston Mohr was one of the brain boys, the thinkers, that sat around in the backroom and planned. I never have much contact with them, which is just as well for both of us, because at times I have had to implement, or try to implement, master plans that a retarded cretin would have discarded. Mostly, though, the brain lads do a good job. They just don't know anything about blood and guts and sweat. Or how death looks when he gets close to you.

I told Mohr that it was all very interesting, but how did the old lama, Li Tzu, fit into all this? Before he could answer Hawk came back and said, "Okay, now that the competition is gone let's get to work. We got a lot of fish to fry. Let's fry 'em."

Preston Mohr looked a little startled. He hadn't been around Hawk as much as I have.

I grinned at my boss. "Phelan give you a goodbye kiss for me?" I do step on a toe from time to time.

“Phelan claims you killed a CIA man in Africa last year,” Hawk said. “I don’t remember anything like that in your report.”

I shrugged. “I must have forgotten to put it in. Anyway it was an honest mistake.”

Hawk scratched the stubble on his chin. “Hmmm. Yes. Well, let’s get on with it, Nick. How much have you told him, Mohr?”

Mohr was cleaning his pipe. “Not much. Barely into it. Lots more to come.”

“Okay. Keep at it. I’m going to shave and maybe catch a little nap. How do you feel about it, Nick? As of this moment? Is any of it making sense?”

I have come to speak very freely before Hawk. “Let me put it this way,” I said. “In an idiom that is of your generation, sir. Or close to it. I was once up the creek without a paddle. My feeling now is much the same. That answer your question?”

Hawk actually did laugh. And patted me on the shoulder, which is akin to being knighted.

“We’ll work it out, Nick. It’s all there; I’m sure of it. All we have to do is fit the pieces together. Get with it, Mohr.”

Preston Mohr got with it. I listened and asked stupid questions. I didn’t get any stupid answers.

For nine solid hours we worked at it. Mohr pooped out first and had to rest. Hawk and I kept at it and ran up one hell of a phone bill for the taxpayers. Peru was only one of the countries we called.

We cut it pretty fine on the timing. I had to be at Rona Matthews’ beach house at ten that night to relieve one of the regular Protective Agency, Inc., men she employed when she threw these soirees.

That part was all set up. They were cooperating, like the high-class and ethical outfit they were, and I was going to relieve a man by name of Gerald Swinger so he could get to the hospital and wait for his new baby. My working name, for the evening, was Bruce Sampliner. God knows where Hawk gets these names!

I had my orders, which I didn’t really need, and so far it looked pretty routine. I was, in fact, nothing but muscle —there to protect the CIA girl who was working from the inside and taking the risks, if any.

Hawk and Preston Mohr drove me as far as Topanga Beach, where I would pick up a car and go on.

Hawk didn’t know what the CIA girl looked like. Phelan hadn’t had time to get one from the files in Langley, and the Special Officer in LA didn’t have any. Or so he said. They don’t like pictures of their personnel floating around. Which makes a lot of sense in our profession.

“I understand,” Hawk said as we drove through Palisades, “that the lady is young and good-looking.”

“So far,” I said, “so good.”

Preston Mohr was driving, with Hawk beside him. I was in the back seat, wearing the green Protective Agency, Inc., cap and uniform, complete with a Sam Browne belt and a .38 Police Positive. I had the Luger in a shoulder clip and the stiletto in the chamois sheath on the inside of my right forearm. I tensed my wrist and the little spring clicked and the stiletto slid down into my palm. I was loaded for bear. I doubted that I would find any bears around Malibu.

Hawk twisted in the seat to give me a fishy stare. He knew I was kidding, of course, but sometimes he is a worrier.

“Maybe I had better remind you,” he rasped, “that this girl, this Miss Kilbride, is being lent to us. Under duress, you might say. And Phelan informs me that she is a lady.”

“How would Phelan know?”

“The point I make,” Hawk went on, “is that if you annoy this young lady in any manner, and it gets back to Phelan, he will certainly break his neck taking the story to the Director. I don’t want that, Nick. They already think we’re a lot of blood-stained barbarians at AXE, and I wouldn’t want them to think we employ sex maniacs as well.”

The old man can needle pretty good himself.

“How,” I asked blandly, “could I possibly annoy a young lady? A nice young lady? It boggles the mind, sir, the mere thought.”

Hawk got tired of playing.

“Just goddamned well see to it that you don’t! Keep your mind on business. You’re there, to protect Patricia Kilbride and to pick up her information, if any, and bring it back to me. I did defer to Phelan on that—he insisted no contact with the girl directly, as far as I am concerned. Doesn’t want her tied in with AXE.”

“I can see his point,” I said. “We’re a rough, uncouth lot, and not fit to associate with nice young ladies.”

Preston Mohr laughed. He had been holding it in a long time. “I can see that you two have a unique working arrangement.”

I could think of nothing to add to that. It about said it all.

They let me out on a dark corner in Topanga Beach. The car was in a vacant filling station a couple of blocks away.

Hawk was still worrying. “Try to obey orders strictly, for once, Nick, and stay out of trouble. This is the only lead we’ve got to this TV thing. Bollux it up and we’re sunk, and. they’ll die laughing at us in Langley. Please, boy, do it by the book this time?”

I never like to see a grown man pleading. I held up my hand as I slipped from the car. “Scout’s honor, sir. I promise to do it right. I keep my mouth shut and my eyes and ears open. I stay out of sight as much as possible. I don’t contact the Kilbride girl—she contacts me.”

“Right. This is a masque, remember. Patricia Kilbride will be wearing a Peter Pan costume.”

I tried to remember what Peter Pan looked like, but all I could visualize was Mary Martin. I didn’t tell Hawk. It would come to me.

Preston Mohr and I shook hands. Hawk and I didn’t shake hands. He never does. But he gave me a look that might have been construed as affectionate and said, “Good luck, boy. Remember we’re in a hurry!”

They drove away. I started walking the two blocks to the deserted filling station where the Chevrolet was parked.

A thought struck me. Suppose there were two Peter Pans at the party. Or three? Or half a dozen? Suppose some of the Peter Pans, assuming there were half a dozen, were men? There was no limit to the permutations—I could get in all sorts of trouble trying to cut the Kilbride out of the herd.

But I couldn’t get in trouble.

I had promised Hawk.

Chapter 3

I was wearing a gold cap and blouse badge and gold bars on my shoulders. A security detail of anything over six men is usually in charge of a sergeant, with an officer dropping past to check now and then. I was the officer, just transferred down from the San Francisco area, and as long as Gerald Swinger had taken off to sweat out a baby—my own bet was that he was home drinking beer and watching the Neo-Com dirty pictures—I was to hang around and pull his detail. I was breaking in, with new men in a new area, and it gave me a perfect excuse to roam the grounds. The CIA gal, Pat Kilbride, would know me by the gold badges.

It had been a long time since I was in Malibu and the first thing I did was miss the turn-off into Arbuckle Road. I was headed for Saddle Peak before I caught it and stopped to question one of the local yokels. He put me right and I backtracked, found Arbuckle, and drove down to the beach.

It was a private beach, a lot of it, demarcated by a high wire fence with nasty-looking barbed wire set out at a 45-degree angle. As I slowed for the gate house I could see, beyond it, a long ramshackle beach house blazing with light. Music that I guessed was from a record player was muffled by the soft white mist beginning to steal in from a sea that was like jappanned glass. They were playing Bartok, so it had to be a record player.

I was on my own now, as Hawk and the Agency brass had decided against letting the security crew in on the deal. They thought the uniform and the gold would carry me, and I hoped they were right. As a new boy I could ask a lot of questions without arousing suspicion.

I had been wearing the cap at a rakish angle; now I straightened it, square type, deciding to play it dead-pan serious. I parked the car in a small, cindered lot and approached the gatehouse. There were three of them, a sergeant and two guards, playing gin, and they watched me with interest and a hint of apprehension. They hadn't been expecting brass and they didn't like it. They figured I would bust up the gin game and start chewing ass.

Private men don't salute. The two guards stopped the gin game to watch me as I entered the gatehouse, and the sergeant looked up from a logbook he was pretending to fill in.

I introduced myself as Sampliner.

"Bruce," I added without smiling. Leaving it up to them to figure out whether or not I was a regular guy. I gave them the San Francisco con and said I was trying to pick up some time and a half.

“A man needs it these days,” I said.

They agreed to that. I took the logbook from the sergeant and scanned the last entry: 11 pm—made rounds—all secure. The sergeant was not a man to waste ink.

I put the logbook down, relaxed a little, and became more of a regular guy. “What’s the poop? I’ll be filling in for Swinger and pulling a tour, so I better know. Who is this Rona Matthews, anyway?”

They were all oldtimers—a lot of guards are older men who have retired—and they weren’t reticent. One of the gin players, who needed a shave and a shoeshine, and knew it, gave me a sly look.

“Where you been, Lieutenant, you don’t know who Rona Matthews is?”

I stared at him, not smiling, and the sergeant picked it up fast. “The Lieutenant don’t want to hear any. of that crap,” he barked at them. “You guys just shut up and play your damned gin game. I’ll fill the Lieutenant in.”

I nodded. “That’s fine, Sergeant. Let’s do it outside, huh? While you’re at it you might as well take me around once.”

Sarge hesitated a second, then nodded okay. He looked at his watch, at a clock over a beat-up filing cabinet, and back at the gin players. “You guys go out in fifteen minutes.”

The guy who didn’t need a shave was studying his cards. Without looking up he said: “We know that, Sergeant.”

Sarge picked up a Detex clock from the filing cabinet and swung it over his shoulder and looked at me. “I’ll just check the big house while we’re out, sir.” He stood aside for me to precede him through the door.

We went out into the mist. It was thickening now and smelled of seaweed and fish mixed with salt. Sarge went ahead of me. We skirted the parking lot and started along a narrow path that ran just inside the fence. We were going away from the beach house, where the music seemed louder and the lights brighter, and we were on the landward side. I could see the car lights skittering along Highway 1 off to our right. I didn’t, yet, see anything of a white pergola where Pat Kilbride was supposed to meet me.

The path widened and I pulled up alongside Sarge. He wasn’t much of a talker. I said: “What was that all about back there?” When he stalled I said, “Off the record, Sergeant. I’m ho company stooge. I do my job, but I don’t take it home with me. And I really don’t know who Rona Matthews is!”

Sarge laughed and swung the beam of his flashlight ahead of us. I didn’t much care for the way the mist was thickening. It was patchy, not solid, and writhed around us like fat white worms.

“You don’t want to mind the guys, Lieutenant. The thing about the

Matthews dame is that Simp claims he screwed her one night. Says she came home drunk—this was a long time ago, and he was on duty alone at the gatehouse. Simp says she came into the gatehouse, gave him a drink from her bottle, and he banged her on the table. I think it's a lot of bull, myself."

I didn't say anything for a moment. Remembering what Preston Mohr told me about Matthews, it did not seem out of the question. I couldn't see that it had anything to do with now.

I laughed. The mist turned the sound hollow, sepulchral.

"That sounds like a tall one, all right. Maybe Simp has been pulling lonely tours too long. It still doesn't tell me who Rona Matthews is." I wanted Sarge to talk, to occupy him so he wouldn't notice how occupied I was. There was still no sign of the pergola.

I listened with one ear as Sarge told me about Rona Matthews. His version was about half true, and when compared with Preston Mohr's file you could see how folk myths begin and expand.

One thing I noted—in all his rambling account Sarge never once mentioned Dion Hermes. The gay boy had managed to keep himself well in the background, I thought, or it could just be that a man like Sarge didn't like talking about queers.

We left the dunes and hit a broad graveled walk. Sarge hitched the Detex clock around on his shoulder and used his flashlight more as we approached the big old mansion looming ahead. With the mist I couldn't see a hell of a lot of it, but what I did see was straight out of a gothic novel. With only a partial, obscured glimpse of the big house I could assemble the rest of it in my mind. Three stories and an attic, dormers and turrets and gables, gingerbread all over the place, and wide verandas on all four sides cluttered with wicker furniture. I looked up at one of the towers, almost expecting, to see a grotesque figure silhouetted against the light, but nothing doing. The big old relic crouched in the mist, silent and dripping, patiently waiting for the wreckers.

Sarge led the way up wide stairs to a veranda. "We got six keys in here," he explained. "First one is right here by the front door."

I watched as he picked up the chained key, inserted it in the Detex clock and twisted it twice. The clock went snick-snack.

I made a funny. "Is the joint haunted?"

Sarge laughed. "Could be, at that. Rona Matthews bought it after she started making it in pictures, I hear. It was a beautiful old place once, I guess. Used to belong to a banker who jumped out a window in 1929. Now it just sits here and rots. We got the keys in here, and check it close, on account of the fire hazard. The wiring is old and there must be a million rats. Also we get beach bums in here from time to time, and sometimes young lovers. You know?"

I said I knew. But how did they get past the fence?

We were inside now, roaming through cavernous rooms with parquet floors. Sarge didn't turn on any lights. "We got the juice turned off in the basement," he explained. "Makes it a little safer."

He clicked a key in a kitchen that was as big as Grand Central and we went down some stairs, following the bounce of his flash on the treads.

"They cut holes in the fences sometimes," he said. "Or use blankets and crawl over the barbed wire. Some come in from the ocean side. We had to rout a whole colony of potheads out of here once, believe it or not. Mostly, though, it's winos and lovers."

It was dark in that basement. Like the pit. And it smelled like a dungeon in some old doge's castle. I followed the brilliant shaft of Sarge's light as he checked keys in the boiler and laundry rooms.

"That's the bunch," Sarge said as he shifted the clock back on his shoulder. "Let's get the hell out of here. This old dump always gives me the creeps."

He hadn't caught it. I had. The smell of a candle, just extinguished. Someone had been there just before we arrived. Someone was still there. I had the feeling.

We were still in the laundry room. Sarge had a head cold, or a lousy sense of smell, but he noticed my reaction, slight as it was.

"What's the matter?"

I reached and took the flashlight from him. "I thought I heard something."

I hadn't heard anything. I had only smelled the candle. Anyway I didn't want Sarge in on it, whatever it was—a wino, lovers, potheads, or the case I was working on. Still I had to make a swift casing job, because I was coming back here.

I played it casual and ran the light fast around the room. Nothing but a maze of pipes and faucets and big old tubs and in one corner a washing machine that was new in 1910. I washed the light past so fast that I saw it, but Sarge didn't. A stub of candle stuck on the corner of a tub, and behind it the wall grime was blotched and smeared. That wall could be moved. There was something behind it. I handed the light back to Sarge. "Must have been one of those rats you were telling me about."

"Yeah. Probably. They're bigger'n cats, I swear. Fact is, I wouldn't put a cat in here. He'd be et alive. Well, that's it, Lieutenant. Let's get out of this spook castle."

We left by a side door and started back down the dunes to the beach. The mist situation had stabilized now, no worse and no better. There was a dank chill in the air, but not really cold.

I muttered to Sarge that I would see him back at the gatehouse and

took off. I had to lose him sometime and now was as good as any.

There were no other security men around. Sarge had told me that la Matthews liked them to stay out of sight as much as possible. Like all good servants, they were to be on hand when needed, but not intrusive.

I followed the Pied Piper music and in a couple of minutes was on a low porch, on the landward side, with a good view through a picture window. The lighting was dim in there but I could see all I needed to.

There were about thirty people in the big living room. They were sitting on couches and chairs and oh the floor. A Japanese boy was wandering around with a tray of drinks and little sandwiches, but the food and drink wasn't getting much of a play. Everybody was watching the little man with the sitar. And the big man with the flute. And the tall slim woman with the Green Goddess mask and costume.

My reading about the Incas of Peru had been damned scanty. Yet I did recognize that Rona Matthews—I would have bet on it—was made up as Sacsahuaman, the Green Goddess of fertility, one of the Sun Virgins and a leader of the Chosen Women. She sat on a round bolster near the Magnavox. She wore a tight-fitting green sheath, was barefoot, and her mask had a hooked nose and great staring eyes. Her ornate headdress was a golden sunburst. Under the mask I could see part of her chin and her throat, and they looked as tight and firm-fleshed as her small breasts. She must have spent a lot of money on plastic surgery.

The big man playing the flute had to be Dion Hermes. Preston Mohr had warned me that the guy didn't swish; still, I hadn't expected him to be so big and good-looking. There was nothing limp-wrist about him, at first glance, and if I hadn't known about him I might have been fooled. And he was playing the flute! That in itself didn't mean anything, but as I studied him now I saw how the act somehow emphasized the weakness about his mouth, the prissiness and bad temper, and the discontent with a world that was not fashioned after his own paradigm.

Dion Hermes, and I knew it then, was one of the tough queers. One of the rough girls. It was instinct with me, so early in the game, but I had a feeling he was going to be trouble.

The lama, Li Tzu, was playing the sitar. It is not a Tibetan instrument, but I knew that didn't signify. He was good. He didn't use a pick, but was plucking the strings with small dainty brown hands that looked like monkey paws.

Li Tzu looked a bit like a monkey himself, a dignified old monkey with a shaved skull and wearing a loose yellow robe. I work a lot by association and my first, off the top of my skull, impression was that this Li Tzu was a composite of Gandhi, Nehru and Maharishi. He did

not remind me of my old yogi, Marajarat, who was the genuine article. But then Marajarat was a yogi, not a lama. I supposed there was a difference.

Li Tzu kept his eyes closed as he played the sitar. His lips moved, but of course I couldn't hear him.

I now devoted a little attention to the guests. Some were in costume, but most weren't, though everybody was wearing a mask of some kind. Except Dion Hermes and Li Tzu. And the character who was circulating around among the guests, handing out tracts or pamphlets of some kind. Even had he been wearing a mask he wouldn't have fooled me—I've seen too many of his type.

Muscle! Bodyguard muscle. Neat and cold-eyed in a dinner jacket cut to accommodate a shoulder gun. Polite and soft-footed as he moved in and out and handed out his papers, stopping to whisper now and again. He was well built, on the slim side, not old and not young, and I would have bet that he didn't drink or smoke or take the needle. He got his jollies out of killing.

I watched him moving about the room, like a tiger pretending to be tame, and I wondered a lot about him. One thing I knew—he wasn't employed by the Agency. They don't go in for hoods.

No sign of Peter Pan. I gave the guests a second close scrutiny just to make sure. No Peter Pan. But I gained something—all the faces were masked, but the hands, the throats, the legs and arms, the back of heads, were not hidden. And they all told the same story.

The guests, all of them, were old people. Or sick people. And, as I knew from that endless nine hours of briefing, they were all wealthy people. Loaded. Filthy rich.

Some of the pieces on this crazy chessboard began to move along proper lines. A few of the jigsaw fragments began to dovetail. Not many. Not much sense yet. The part of the problem that was swinging into light was simple enough and an old, old story. Nothing more than a reprise of the old cult swindle. There would be angles that I didn't know about yet, but no matter how you gift-wrap it it is still baloney.

It was the other half of the problem that stymied me so far. Maybe Hawk was right, but I wasn't buying it yet. Hawk said the two cases, problems, whatever, were running in parallel. To me it appeared more that they were running in parallax. Hawk and I weren't on the same wave length. Unless he was keeping something back. He will do that occasionally. There have been times when his little habit has damned near gotten me dead. But the old man always apologizes.

The Kilbride girl was quick and soft on her feet. Not many people can come up behind me the way she did now.

I was in shadow, but there was enough light for her to see the gold badges. She stopped a foot behind me, exuding a healthy female odor,

and said: "Are you Lieutenant Sampliner?"

I nodded without looking around. I kept peering into the room. "Yeah. And you're Peter Pan?"

We weren't playing games, and both of us knew it, yet I started liking her when she had to choke back a giggle.

"Yes. I'm Peter Pan. You're late, Lieutenant. I've been looking all over for you."

I still didn't look around. I didn't want to miss anything in the room. She was closer to me now and breathing into my ear. Her breath was sweet and she had been chewing mints.

"There were some minor holdups," I murmured. "Why? Anything earthshaking happen yet?"

"N-no." She wasn't giggling now. She sounded nervous. "I'm beginning to get scared," she said. "I don't understand that. I was never afraid before, and I don't like it."

"Scared of what?" I had just made a discovery. I had reckoned about thirty people in the room when I started peeping. Now I counted twenty-two. I might have been off one or two, but not eight. What the hell?

Maybe she was scared. Maybe that was the reason she was suddenly close to me and I felt a very firm thigh and good solid breasts. Plus a faint whiff of good, not expensive, perfume.

Her lips brushed my ear as she whispered, "I don't really know why I'm frightened, except that it's all been too easy. Mr. Phelan planted me here as a guest, a stranger, sort of a friend of a friend thing. I had a card, of course. You have to have one to get in. But I haven't been a stranger. I've been accepted completely. Too completely! Rona Matthews has made a pass at me and Mr. Hermes has made a pass at me, and I think that the old lama, Li Tzu, was about to make a pass at me when I sneaked away. And I'm the only young woman here! That bothers me. I saw some of the other women in the powder room and they're all crones."

I put an arm around her waist. It was small and soft-firm.

"I'm not making a pass," I told her. And I wasn't. Yet. Business always comes first with me.

She must have believed me, because she didn't pull away. I turned her so she was peering into the room with me. "Check me out, Pete."

She giggled again when I called her Pete, but it was a nervous giggle.

I talked. "The Green Goddess mask is Rona Matthews. The flute player is Dion Hermes. No question about Li Tzu—but who is the smooth character in the dinner jacket who hands out the tracts or whatever?"

He was out of circulation at the moment, lounging near a doorway,

and keeping a watchful eye on things. I could visualise the gun under the perfectly cut dinner jacket. It would be a short-barrel job, probably a Banker's .38. Nasty close up.

She nodded against my cheek. "Yes. He bothers me, too. But I don't know his name. They call him Roy. That's all I know—except that he gives me the shivers. He's got eyes like a dead fish."

So much for Roy. "People keep vanishing," I said. "You know anything about that? Nobody is leaving, going back to the gatehouse; yet they keep dropping out of sight. Where?"

And now she did surprise the hell out of me.

"There's a tunnel from the beach house, this place, to another big old house that isn't used. You go through a panel in the billiard room. Dion Hermes showed it to me."

Roy, the suave gunman, must have been heavy on the intuitive side. He was staring across the room at our window. I knew he couldn't see us, but I didn't like it. When he started skirting the room, threading his way through the people like an open field runner, I took Pete's arm and got the hell out of there. We went into the mist a few paces, and I was lost. She wasn't. She took my arm and we were back at the little white pergola in two minutes. Along the way I was doing a lot of thinking.

The pergola had open lattice sides, now screened by sea roses. There was a wicker divan with damp pillows. I lit cigarettes and we sat on the divan. I put my arm around her. "It will look more natural," I explained. "If someone stumbles over us." The fact that I was an Agency guard, not a guest, might take a little more explaining, but what the hell! So I was a fast worker.

As I lit our cigarettes I liked what I saw in the brief flare of light. She was not as young as she looked—the CIA doesn't use babies—but she had one of those fresh Irish faces that holds beauty for a long time. Her eyes were wide-set, I thought a dark blue, and the nose was saucy and tilted, the mouth wide and determined over a tough little chin. She was pert in the Peter Pan outfit, very firm of leg and breast in the dark tights and doublet. A rakish little hat, complete with feather, was set cockily on short brown hair that inclined to curl in the mist.

She took a good look at me, too, but her expression didn't say anything. And again she didn't move away from my arm. But then she'd said that she was afraid. Maybe that was it.

"The tunnel bit is very interesting," I said. "It explains where all the people are going. But I don't want that yet —take it in proper sequence, from the time you arrived here this evening. Before that, if you know anything. Like who set this deal up, and how. Make it fast, honey, because I want you back in there in ten minutes."

She was good. Good observer and a good memory. She knew how to cut corners and synopsise. I had the gist of it in five minutes.

Phelan had planned the whole thing. Set it up. He'd planted Pete on a friend of Rona Matthews. I read that as meaning ex-lover, who in turn had introduced the girl to the old movie star. I had to hand Phelan credit for that—he had worked fast.

"Matthews is in a Lesbian phase now," she told me in a matter-of-fact tone. "That was explained to me. I could have turned the job down. Mr. Phelan was very nice, very thoughtful, about that. It helped, of course, that Mr. Phelan is a very old friend of Rona Matthews. I had a really thorough briefing, so I haven't made any, mistakes so far. I've done and said the right things and I think I'm getting away with it. To Matthews I'm just a pretty young woman that she wants to make when she can get around to it. After business is over. My job is to play hard to get. So far I'm doing all right."

I hadn't known that Phelan was an old friend of la Matthews. Another ex-lover? Hawk must have known, though he hadn't mentioned it

"Li Tzu is really an old doll," she went on. "I almost think he's genuine. I get the idea that Matthews and Dion Hermes are using him. Anyway they're setting him up in this place in Peru—I don't know too much about that—where a very few people, very select people, can go into retreat and meditate with him. Share his wisdom. Only I think there's more to it than that."

I smiled over her shoulder into the dank mist. I would have bet there was more to it. The thing was I didn't know what. But Peru was enough. It tied in somehow.

She snuggled closer to me. It was chilly. "That Roy person, the one you say is a gunman, has been passing out literature and taking checks. The beach house gathering is just to weed people out, to find out who is interested in going to that place in Peru. They have to put up five thousand dollars as a sort of binder. I saw one of the checks."

That bothered me again. They had given Pete, a new and casual acquaintance, the run of the place. On her first night there. They didn't seem to care a damn what she saw or heard. That I didn't like at all.

I already knew, but I asked anyway. "As soon as they hand over the five thousand—what happens then?"

"They drift off to the billiard room. Then Dion Hermes takes them through the tunnel to the big house. You have to use candles and you come out in a laundry room. Why are you nodding?"

"I'm not. A crick in my neck. This damp—go on."

"Across the laundry room there's another sliding panel. Leads into a sort of auditorium or, maybe, more like a projection room that you

use for private screenings. You. know.”

“I know. And Dion Hermes showed you all this?”

“Yes. It was early in the evening. Only one other guest had arrived. Rona Matthews was very gracious, but she was busy with Li Tzu and that Roy, and Mr. Hermes sort of took me in hand. I told you he made a pass at me.”

“That does surprise me.”

She nearly giggled again. “I know. I was a little surprised at first, both ways, before I got the message. He acts straight enough at first. And the pass wasn’t much— a little feeling in the tunnel as we went through. I just ignored it and I think he was relieved.”

I glanced at the AXE watch on the inside of my wrist. Time was getting scant I threw the questions at her rapid-fire.

Dion Hermes had played the tunnel bit as sort of a put on, an amusing relic of the past The banker who built the house—I supposed it was the same one who did the window act in 1929—had connected the beach house and the main house for reasons of his own. Like sneaking away from wifey, no doubt. The projection room must have been for dirty pictures. I didn’t have time to waste on imagining what dirty pictures were like back in those days. I have, in point of fact, never been much of a man for dirty pictures. I don’t even, as the old joke goes, own a pornograph.

Anyway, I had the meat of it. Some of it I understood, some I didn’t, but the evening was just beginning. The sheep had by now been separated from the goats—according to who put up five thousand bills—and the masks were to protect the guests from each other. Suckers like to remain anonymous.

Pete couldn’t imagine why all the guests were old. I had an inkling. There is no fool like an old fool, a cliché that, like most clichés, is well-grounded in truth.

I pulled Pete to her feet. She was, for a moment, soft and fragrant against me and I can always tell when a girl wants to be kissed. Even a CIA girl. I wanted to kiss her. I liked her and I wanted her, in a .sort of gentle, easygoing, take-your-time way. I decided that when this was over I would make a gentlemanly pass and see what happened. Now I was working.

“Get back in there,” I told her, “and pick up where you left off. It shouldn’t be long now until the real show starts, whatever it is. I want you there. I’ll be there, too, so don’t be afraid.”

She leaned close and pecked me on the cheek, an absurd, soft, moist, little schoolgirl kiss, and I liked it.

“Somehow,” she breathed, “I’m not afraid anymore. You affect me very strangely, Lieutenant Sampliner. I suppose a lot of girls tell you that?”

“Not enough girls tell me that. Now get cracking, kid. If you’ve been missed, and they ask questions, you’ll just have to think up some good lies. You might try the one about liking to stroll alone on the beach, with the mist in your hair.”

I watched her disappear into the mist, back toward the beach house. She was a nice girl, a sweet kid. How in hell had she wandered into this line of work?

Something ticked in my mind and I swore softly to myself. I had meant to ask her something, something that might be important, but in a complicated mess like this you can’t think of everything.

I wanted to ask her about her personal relations, if any, with Bill Phelan.

I even started after her, against my judgment, because I wanted to get back to that laundry room fast, and stake out a seat for the upcoming show, or seance or whatever the hell it was.

I had been right about Roy boy. He was good. I hadn’t heard a sound, not a whisper, and I’m good. He must have been waiting there in the mist, listening and waiting, and he let the girl walk past him in the mist to where another man waited for her. Roy wanted me.

He stepped out from behind the dune, the Banker’s gun in his right hand. Roy was the silent and efficient type. Thrifty, too. Saving lead. He figured one shot would do it.

Instinct took me sideways, presenting a narrow target, and the slug smashed over my heart, but glancing and tearing off the gold badge. It felt like a good heavyweight landing his best punch square on my ticker and it stopped me dead for a second within a second.

Then I went in low at him, no time to go for the Luger or stiletto, and he shot my cap off with his second try. He was trusting the mist to muffle and distort the revolver sound.

I took him at the knees and twisted him down. He chopped at my head with the gun. That was a mistake. I was a lot stronger man. I had his gun wrist and broke it easily and kneed him in the balls at the same time. He groaned and tried to get his teeth in me. I busted him in the mouth. I’ve got a head like a cannon ball and I heard his dental work go.

I didn’t want to kill him. There is yet another cliché— a dead man can’t talk—and I wanted Roy to talk. So I grabbed a lot of glistening dress shirt with my left hand, kicked his gun away with my left foot and set him up for a hard right that would send him bye-bye for a time.

That was my mistake. With his good hand he reached for the back of his neck and came up with a shiv, neck sheath dangling between his shoulder blades.

The knife was long and nasty in the mist. He slashed at my eyes. I

had no choice but to take the point in my left arm, between the wrist and elbow. It hurt me.

That was that. At times I can be as patient as a cat at a mouse hole, but this was not one of the times. I clicked the stiletto down into my right hand and pushed it into him as hard as I could, right through the frilly dress shirt and into heart tissue. I twisted the stiletto as I took it out, to let in air and make him bleed to death faster. I had had it with this sonofabitch.

I stepped back fast. Even so, I got a lot of his blood on the green uniform and wondered if they would send Hawk a cleaning bill.

Roy went to his knees on the path, grabbing at the red shirt front and staring at me with those dead eyes. Even then, dying, his facial muscles hardly moved. His last words were distinct, low-toned.

“Rotten bastard!”

He didn’t fall over. He swayed, crumpled slowly, and went into sleep with his face in the sand. I kicked his knife off the path, turned him over with my foot and saw that he was really dead. His eyes had as much expression in death as they’d had in life.

My left arm was bleeding profusely. I was most unhappy about it, but knew. I wasn’t much hurt. One of those flesh scratches that bleed a lot and mean nothing. I was about to peel off my tunic to get at the wound with a handkerchief when I heard the footsteps behind me.

I was ready. No excuses. I am no alibi artist. I had the stiletto in my left and the Luger out now, ready in my right hand, low at my side and out of sight. I was also thinking like crazy, trying to weigh and balance, to figure just how much this blood episode was going to gum up the works.

Maybe it was because I knew he was a nance. And forgot my own auto-warning about him.

Dion Hermes stopped and looked at me, then at the dead man. His hands were empty and on his handsome face was only surprise and horror. And maybe disgust at so much blood. Uncouth, you know. Vulgar.

He took a step closer to me and peered into my face.

“Who are you? What in the world is going on here? Is Roy dead? Have you killed Roy?”

His hands were empty. That lulled me. And his questions seemed reasonable enough, if a little flat and lacking inspiration. Obvious. Yet he wasn’t a man to jump to conclusions. He was asking me if I had killed Roy.

I said I had.

“He tried to kill me, sir. Jumped at me out of the mist and started shooting. Look—see this badge!” I was still playing the Protection man, hoping I might bring it off, but not counting on it. Still, it was

the only game in town.

He moved to stare down at the dead man. "It is Roy. You say he tried to kill you?"

He looked back at me and shook his head in disbelief. "But why? Why? What happened between you two?"

I took a step away from him and kept my eyes on his hands. He had long spatulate fingers, immaculately clean. As immaculate as his diction.

I got impatient. I was thinking like mad, trying to figure a way out of this mess without blowing the whole deal.

"Nothing happened between us," I snapped. "He tried to kill me and I killed him first, that's all. Was he crazy? A nut?"

He stared at me and shook his head slowly. "No. Nothing like that. Roy was perfectly sane. And I knew Roy. I don't know you from Adam. I think, yes, I am positive, that we had better call the police. Without delay."

It was ironic. I didn't want the police. Hawk didn't want the police. Phelan didn't want the police. I doubted very much that Dion Hermes wanted the police. And the police had been warned off—except for murder and/or rape. Somehow I didn't feel like chuckling. And still hadn't decided what to do.

For a fairy he had plenty of guts. He put his hand on my arm and said, "I am going to make a citizen's arrest. I do make it. Now. You will have to come back to the beach house with me. We will call the police and get this dreadful matter straightened out."

His hands weren't empty any longer. Not his right hand. He had a fountain pen in it. Or something that looked like a fountain pen. When it was too late I knew where he had hidden it. Behind his ear. His hair was longish, curling on his neck, and he carried the little pressure gun behind his ear, the way you carry a real pen or pencil.

He was an expert. He gave me the gas right in the face, in my nostrils and eyes, and my muscles went dead instantly and I couldn't raise the Luger or the stiletto. It was a nerve gas. I knew about it, and if I had had time I could even have identified it. They use it a lot.

There was no time. It was getting dark and I was stiff as a corpse, toppling slowly off a high cliff. It was a long, long way down.

Chapter 4

Waiting for Hawk can, at times, be nearly as frustrating as waiting for Godot.

This was one of the times. I was in the bar of the Gran Bolivar Hotel, the best in Lima at 400 sols per day. AXE always travels first-cabin when the mission will allow it. I was on my ninth Scotch and, though I have a great tolerance for alcohol, the bartender, didn't know that. He kept watching me and I was expecting the old eighty-six any minute, or whatever it is in Peru.

It was, almost to the minute, twenty-four hours since Dion Hemes had blasted me with the nerve gas. It had been, and I kid not, the weirdest twenty-four hours of my life.

I knew what I was doing. Why I was drinking so much and not getting drunk. I was trying not to think about what Dion Hermes had done to Peter Pan. Yeah. Pat Kilbride was dead, very obscenely dead, and I kept remembering the soft, moist, little-girl kiss she had given me. It was better than remembering the way I had last seen her.

The bartender didn't want to serve me the last Scotch. I gave him a hard stare. He served me. Just then Hawk came in, wearing a light topcoat against the chill. It was fifty degrees outside, on the Avenida Abancay.

Hawk looked good. Pert and sprightly. I looked terrible. I had bags under the bags under my eyes and knew it, I didn't care. At the moment I cared about only one thing—getting the show on the road. Finding Dion Hermes and killing him as painfully as possible.

Hawk took the stool next to me and blew on his hands. "June in January, the old song goes. Hah! Down here it's January in June."

I gave him a look. There are times when the old man can be very trying. Especially when he switches off his usual dour manner and tries to put a bright face on matters.

I didn't say anything. He looked at my glass. "How many is that?"

"Ten. So? I can have ten more and it won't affect me much. We both know that, so why bring it up?"

He tried to smile, to bring his shiny store teeth to bear on my black mood, then gave it up and switched off the smile the way you switch off a bulb. I knew what was bugging him. He didn't like the way Pat Kilbride's death was bugging me. Didn't like it because I was a human being for a change, with real emotions, instead of Killmaster. Super-killer. A pawn isn't supposed to object to being moved around on the board.

He said, "Forget it, son. I don't give a damn how much you drink. I

know you can handle it.”

He tapped his briefcase. “The real reason why I think you should knock it off is in here. The papers just came through. You are now a Peace Corps man. An Associate Representative—thought I might as well get you a little rank while I was at it—and you leave at dawn for Cuzco. There’s a Rural Co-op near there and it is near the place we’re interested in.”

Hawk was half whispering. There was no one within six stools of us on either side. I just hoped that his bourbon wasn’t bugged.

“They’re giving us a jeep,” he went on. “You’ll drive it yourself. That’s the custom down here. You’re a new man and you’re making your first inspection tour. How much do you know about rabbits and chickens?”

I must have looked my disgust. Hawk chuckled and slid off his stool. He picked up the briefcase. “Come on, son. Talbot and Bennett should be in the room by now. They’re permanent party down here and they’ll be working with you—up to a point.”

I didn’t say anything until we were in the elevator. It was automatic and we could talk.

“Up to a point is all right,” I said then. “On the mission proper, the TV thing. But you warn them off Dion Hermes. He’s all mine! I want that made perfectly clear.”

He was dead-pan now, his old face a mass of wrinkles and his eyes a trifle narrowed. I knew he was getting sore and I didn’t give a damn.

All he said was, “We’ll have a little chat about that, son, before you go.”

I had never met either Bennett or Talbot before. They looked to be typical AXEmen, not as elegant and well turned out as CIA, not as young and ivyclad as FBI, but a lot tougher. Rugged. Part of Hawk’s genius is picking the right men for the right jobs.

Hawk’s suite overlooked the Plaza San Martin. I wandered to a window and watched the signs flicker on the Banco Comercial and in the BOAC offices.

Hawk was talking with Bennett and Talbot and I heard a rustling of maps.

“The Co-op is near Machu Picchu,” said Hawk. “Nick will go there first, just to implement his cover, then he’ll cut back southeast to Calca. Alone. You two will keep out of sight and cover him. You three will have to work out the details among yourselves. Nick is in command and you will follow his orders to the letter. Is that clear?”

Both men said it was clear, and Hawk got the TV set going. The Neo-Coms were coming in strong, five by five, a beautiful picture and sound. That figured, because if Hawk was right, the transmitter was only about 400 miles from Lima. The Peruvian Government, at the

moment, wasn't doing anything about it. They had called in their patrols and were lying doggo. Washington was putting on plenty of pressure, and Lima was going along with it. The Government couldn't cope anyway, and knew it, so they were leaving it up to us and saving time, money and face.

Us meant Hawk and me. Which, in essential, meant me.

The Chinese devil mask was speaking again. It was the same voice—a woman that the CIA voice graphs had identified as Rona Matthews. Precise, professional, beautifully modulated, reading from an exquisitely written script. Every word was just right, used in just the correct nuance, fitted perfectly into the context.

It came to me then. Not out of the blue, because it had been churning around in my subconscious all this while. Exquisite is not a word I normally use. Or think. Few men do.

Preston Mohr had said, that Dion Hermes was a fine writer. I now agreed. And knew that Hermes was writing the scripts. He was an exquisite himself—an exquisite homo, an exquisite murderer. Why not an exquisite writer? There's nothing in the rules against it.

I had to think about it then, and I did, and it was like my own stiletto in my guts. Dion Hermes had killed Pat Kilbride in a most exquisite manner. The way that only a queer, with a deep and undying hatred of all women, would have known how to kill.

Rona Matthews' voice kept chiming into the room while the devil mask moved from closeup to semi, then panned back for a long shot against a frieze of temples, then back to closeup amid sworls of smoky mist.

"And now we are going to show you a film, of the sort that is sometimes called a travelogue—in this case perhaps documentary is a better word—in which you will see how the Great Wall was built ..."

Hawk got up and turned off the set. "Enough of that. Let's get on with our job, which is to put them out of business as soon as possible."

Suddenly I felt better. We were on our way at last. My black mood was going. I couldn't have saved her from that shameful death. No man could, given the circumstances. I lit a gold tip and gave Hawk a surly grin. "You're right, sir. Let's get on with it."

Hawk spread maps on the table and traced the route I was to take into the high Andes. "Almost five hundred miles, the way you'll have to go. The roads are terrible until you get past Ayacucho—after that they're lousy."

"You'll be using llama tracks for the last hundred miles," Talbot put in. "If you can find any. And you'll be crossing a lot of punas, tablelands where they graze the llamas. Avoid the herders if you can. They can be nasty at times—most of them are Indians that still worship the boa. A lot of not so funny things happen to travelers in

those parts.”

I looked at Hawk and asked the question I had been wanting to ask for a long time. There was another question, too, that I wanted to ask even more—why had Hawk broken all his own rules and come out into the field on this mission? What made it so special-special?

I couldn't ask that one. Not in front of Talbot and Bennett.

What I did ask was: “Why do I have to jeep in? Why can't an AXE plane drop me in at night?”

Hawk nodded. “A good question. And I have a good answer—because you are Peace Corps—that's your cover —and they don't travel by plane. They stay on the ground and close to the people. Part of their job. And yours. You must never forget that every Peace Corps man is an ambassador of good will for the United States.”

Even Bennett looked embarrassed. Talbot just looked blank. Hawk looked at me benignly, smiling his sweet-old-man's smile, and asked, “Satisfied?”

I was, in a way. I knew he was lying. Ordinarily, going by usual procedure, Hawk got me in and out as fast as possible. Not this time. I was to do it the slow and hard way. It was perfectly feasible to fly to Cuzco, and Hawk and I both knew it. So he was stalling, waiting for something, and he wasn't going to tell me about it in front of the other two. Maybe not at all.

Hawk stripped a fresh cigar and pointed it at Talbot. “Give Nick the poop on the guerrillas up there. We'll call them that.” His grin was sour and scant. “The Peruvian Army says they haven't got any guerrillas in the mountains. They're smugglers!”

Both Talbot and Bennett laughed. “That's the usual official bull, sir. They've got guerrillas, all right.” Talbot said it, and it sounded as if he was accusing someone of having body lice.

“Not too many,” he went on, “and they've been pretty quiet since Guevara was killed up in Bolivia. We're sure there is a tie-in—Havana is running the setup—but the bunch in the Andes is mostly local talent. Mestizos. Maybe a couple of Cuban officers. The leader, though, is pure Spanish. Castilian. She is from one of the very old families—one of her uncles owns half of Lima—and they call her El Rubio. The blonde one.”

I looked at Hawk. “Her?”

Bennett snickered. “You probably won't bump into her, Nick. Might be fun if you did—from all I hear she is one terrific hunk of woman. Of course she must be crazy! Leaving her family and all that dough to live in the mountains with a bunch of mangy bandits.”

“Guerrillas,” said Talbot. “Give them their due, Wayne. They steal only for their cause. They're not really—”

Hawk bit his cigar in half. “Smugglers! That's what we call them.

And we'll leave them alone if they leave us alone. I want that strictly understood. We're after that transmitter and nothing else. Leave the guerrillas to the Peruvian Army. All right, Bennett. Equipment, transportation, terrain and cover plan, that's all your department. How do we stand?"

Bennett wasn't too bright, maybe, but he was a good man on detail. Everything was A-OK, GO, and the stuff was waiting for us in a garage on the outskirts of town, near Limatambo Airport. Rifles and machine guns hidden in the jeeps. Grenades: gas, smoke and fragmentation. Plastic explosive and detonators. Spare ammo. Food. Emergency kits. Snow glasses. Climbing equipment.

Bennett had a pencil out and was ticking off a list. "Long johns and llamaskin coats, masks, sweaters—and I got some of those new combat boots they're using in Vietnam. I just hope the crampons fit them."

I said that I did, too, and looked a question at the old man. "Sounds like I'm going to do a lot of climbing, sir."

I didn't exactly have it figured yet. If Rona Matthews and Dion Hermes, and little old Li Tzu could get to this place without any sweat—how come I was outfitted to climb the Matterhorn?

Talbot said, "The stuff is just in case, Nick, but you'll probably have to use it. I've never actually been in that country, but I've flown over it, and believe me it's rugged. The last of the Incas held off the Spaniards for thirty-five years in those mountains—and the Spaniards were trying. That will give you some idea."

Bennett nodded in agreement. "Some of the passes are three miles high. Calco itself is 19,500 feet, and some of those granite canyons are a mile deep. When this mission is over we'll damned well know we've been on a trip!"

We batted the breeze for another twenty minutes, then Hawk dismissed them. I wanted a drink but I didn't take it. We were leaving at dawn. Hawk would drive me to the garage out by Limatambo.

Hawk went to the bathroom and I answered the phone. One of those accidental slips in timing that he couldn't possibly have foreseen.

I said hello. After a little hesitation a gruff voice said: "This is Dome calling. I wish to speak to Slaver."

I'm good at voices and I recognized this one now. Director of the CIA. Most Exalted Potentate. Himself.

I said to hold on a minute. I tapped on the bathroom door and asked the old man if Slaver was one of his aliases. He grunted and went to the phone.

Hawk picked up the receiver and stared over it at me. One of the few times I've ever seen him indecisive.

I grinned at him. "Shall I leave?"

He surprised me. "Yes, son. Maybe you had better. Go to your room and catch some sleep. I'll call you an hour before we start for the garage. And no more booze, eh, boy?"

I held up my right hand in Scout's honor. "No more booze." I left and heard him lock the door behind me before he went back to the phone.

So he did have a secret! Just between my own Hawk and the CIA big wheel. I didn't have an inkling, not a clue, and I wasn't going to knock myself out over it. If Hawk wanted me to know he would tell me—when he got damned good and ready.

I went to my room, locked it, made a search for bugs that was more habit than anything else, found none, checked the closets and the bathroom and the fire-escape and under the bed. Nothing. I stripped down to my shorts and stretched on the bed and made a conscious and intensive effort to keep from thinking about the girl, Pat Kilbride. Not to remember that moist, schoolgirl kiss.

I fought them off, those thoughts I did not want to think, those mental images I did not want to recall, and tried to remember everything Hawk had told me during the flight from Mexico City to Lima.

Rona Matthews, Dion Hermes, Li Tzu, and a dozen "clients," for which read "suckers," had flown into Lima a few hours ahead of us. Braniff charter. By now they were all ensconced, more or less happily, on a high peak in the Cordillera Vilcabamba. The peak itself, as peaks go in the Andes, was a minor little pimple—not much more than a mile high—which stood in the Valley of the Happy Death. It was called Condor's Crag. And vultur gryphi weren't the only vultures inhabiting it—not anymore.

There was an ancient temple and palace complex atop the crag. The old lama, Li Tzu, had spent a lot of money renovating it and adding modern heating and plumbing. The old Incas never had it so good.

There was also a helicopter pad. Very convenient— and very necessary. Li Tzu, judging by the one brief look I'd gotten, was probably several centuries old. Rona Matthews was no chicken. (I was getting to think the way Hawk, talks.) Dion Hermes was in pretty fair shape for his age, really excellent shape for a murdering old queen, but I couldn't see him tackling snow-blocked passes or clambering up mountains.

More important—all the clients, the twelve men and women who had paid their dough and were going into retreat on the crag, to sit at Li Tzu's feet and absorb wisdom, or whatever he was selling, they were all old people. Or sick. Or both.

So no problem. You took a charter or a regular plane from Lima to Cuzco, then helicoptered to the crag. Simple. Comfortable. Expensive, maybe, but they could all well afford it.

I knew I wasn't going to get any sleep. I pushed away the image of a pert Irish face and went back to remembering our conversation on the plane from Mexico City... .

My left arm, where I had taken Roy's shiv, was aching badly, and Hawk insisted that I take some of the medication the AXE doc in San Diego had given me. Along with a very neat bandaging job. I went to the water cooler and took the pills and when I got back to my seat Hawk started telling me what he had turned up on Li Tzu. We had a rear seat, last in the row, and the stewardess was up forward sitting in the captain's lap. No one in the seat ahead of us and the one over the aisle was occupied by a mother and child. Hawk didn't exactly whisper, but only I could hear him.

"The lama seems to be the genuine article," he said. "Li Tzu is his square monicker." I told you he talks like a 1931 gangster movie.

"No record," Hawk went on. "Travels a lot, never any trouble. This time last year he was in London. Year before that it was Paris. Year before that, Bombay."

"You've got a good file on him, sir. You get all this from Phelan?"

He looked sly. "Some. Not all. Enough to get me started—then I put Preston Mohr on it. He's a good man in his line."

I mulled it over for a moment. "Speaking of lines—just exactly what is Li Tzu's line? I still don't know exactly what he does, or claims to do. Should be interesting."

"It is," said Hawk. "Oh, it is indeed interesting. But what is even more interesting is how he has stayed out of trouble. Why he hasn't landed in the slammer for fraud. He is either the luckiest lama in the world—or he can really do what he claims he can do!"

"And that is?"

Hawk likes to build a story. At times I suspect him of being a frustrated writer.

"Li Tzu is pulling the sexual rejuvenation bit, Nick. He claims to have invented some new miracle drug. We think he's got whatever he has from the Chinese. There hasn't been time to dig very deep, but from what I've got so far the old rascal has really been feeding his clients some medical junk."

My arm hurt, my head ached, and I kept seeing Pat Kilbride dying; still I couldn't resist the gig. "You going to sit at his feet, pop a pill into your mouth, and regain your youth, sir?"

He pretended not to hear me. "We got hold of an eyewitness. Or Phelan did. Seems the Los Angeles DA is taking an interest in Li Tzu and what goes on at Rona Matthews' place in Malibu. It also seems

that when you are really convinced, when you become a true believer in the lama, that you have to will all your property to him.”

“Ho-hah,” I said. “Comes a little more light.”

“There have been squawks from relatives who stand to lose,” the old man continued. “One beef especially from the niece and nephew of an old woman named Beth Muller. Loaded. They talked her out of it and she talked, made a deposition in the DA’s office. This Li Tzu is a stud. And a specialist in aphrodisiacs. The old lady, Beth Muller, saw him perform for over an hour with a variety of women. And he is an old old man! The Muller woman said that she was highly aroused, sexually excited to an intense degree—and she is in her eighties. She said, in the deposition, that she felt like a young woman again.”

I knew, but I asked anyway. “Where did she see this demonstration? In the secret projection room in the old house at Malibu?”

“Naturally. It was part of the sales pitch, to enlist her as a devotee of the lama. It was on film, not live, but the old lady swears it was made very recently and that it was Li Tzu and not an imposter. They showed closeups of him, and of recent newspapers with current stories, also the latest newsreels, to prove their point. The film wasn’t a phony. The old lama, Li Tzu, can really do it!”

Hawk sounded wistful. I reminded myself of what I so often forgot—the old man was only human, after all.

“So that takes care of that angle,” I said. “Maybe Li Tzu does have a secret. And he’s conning old and sick people into thinking he can teach it to them—make them young again through sex. In return for all their money. Open and shut.”

Hawk’s nod was cautious. “Up to a point, yes. We’ve checked out the twelve people, men and women, who are flying to Peru this trip. Collectively they’re worth about two hundred million.”

It is amazing how much detailed information Hawk can dig up in a very short time. Then I remembered and it wasn’t so amazing after all. He was top man, and cracking the whip over the CIA, FBI and all the rest of the services.

I didn’t understand his implied reservations. “Looks pretty clear, sir. The dough is being siphoned off to these Neo-Coms, the TV setup, through Dion Hermes and Rona Matthews. That’s how the Corns are paying for the transmitter, for the laser technique and all the rest of it. How Li Tzu could afford to rebuild the old Inca palace on Condor Crag and use it as a retreat. My guess is that Li Tzu is only a front—maybe he doesn’t even know what’s really going on—and that Hermes and Matthews are using him. And the Neo-Coms are using them. All very neat and cozy, and with that kind of money coming into the country the Peruvian government isn’t going to move until their hand is

forced.”

Hawk agreed to that. “We know the score on that, Nick. Somebody, a lot of people, have been paid off big to let this thing get as far as it has. Nothing surprising there—just mill-run corruption. Now that they have actually started transmitting, of course, the fun and games are over. The bribes stop. The Peruvians will have to take official recognition now. We’ve got that part well in hand. That doesn’t worry me.”

He wasn’t fooling me. I’ve known him too long.

“Then what is bugging you, sir? Something is.”

He looked out the window. We were somewhere over Colombia at the moment, nearing the stop at Bogota. We would also land at Quito before we got to Lima.

He put a cigar in his thin mouth. The cellophane was still on it and he chewed away without knowing it. Finally he said: “Something that beats the hell out of me, son. There isn’t a shred of anything on either Matthews or Dion Hermes to tie them in with the Commies. Not a whisper! Absolutely no record of any connection, anywhere, anytime, with any Commie organization. Not the Russians. Not the ChiComs. Not the American Party or any other Party in any country in the world. It’s impossible, and yet there it is. I just don’t get it. How Could two agents like this Matthews and Hermes, if they are agents, stay hidden so long? Our intelligence simply isn’t that bad. I wish I had the answer.”

My mind had wandered a bit and suddenly I couldn’t fend it off any longer—the picture sound of Pat Kilbride screaming for the last time.

“Booze is the only answer,” I told Hawk, and caught the stewardess as she passed by. I ordered a double Scotch. Hawk passed.

After a long sip I looked over my glass at the old man. “Could be that these two are Johnny-come-latelies. New blood. Recruited by somebody for just this one job.”

He didn’t look at me and he didn’t answer. Just kept staring out the window at the northern tip of South America. I knew he was thinking along the same lines I was. What I didn’t know, then, was that Hawk had a pretty good idea who the recruiter was—and that Hawk was playing a devious game of interservice rivalry, going for the power and the glory and to hell with the consequences.

It wouldn’t have made any real difference if I had known. I play it the way Hawk plays it—short of treason. And if the President of the United States trusts Hawk one hundred percent then I figure I can trust him, too.

It is just that we don’t always see things from the same angle... .

Now, in the room in the Gran Bolivar, and finally convinced that I

wasn't going to get any sleep, I let pat Kilbride and the whole rotten, filthy scene surging back into my mind. I could bear thinking about it now. I had to. I had to face it a last time, get it out of the way so I could get on with the mission at hand.

Hawk and I differed on that, too. His prime mission was to destroy the Neo-Com TV transmitter. Mine was to find Dion Hermes and kill him. After I had tortured and degraded him the way he had tortured and degraded the girl.

Chapter 5

I was not unconscious long. Probably not more than five minutes. When I got my mind back, though, I was a vegetable. Completely paralyzed. I could see, hear; I could understand what I was seeing and hearing. I couldn't move a single muscle.

I was being dragged over sand by a rope fitted beneath my armpits. Part of the planning. The rope hadn't just happened to be there.

The mist was still thick in patches and whoever was dragging me was making heavy going of it. I was face up, my back to him, and the rope was cutting hell out of my chest and armpits. My useless legs dragged—bump-bump-bump—and I lost a shoe to a root buried in the sand.

The man dragging me must have been sweating. He was panting, gasping, uh—uh—uh—as we toiled up a dune. A breeze stirred the mist and the scent of him came back to me. An expensive man's cologne—too much of it. Dion Hermes. Who else?

I knew what he'd sprayed me with. Those AXE seminars do have a point, at times. It was a variant—used in less than half-strength because I was still alive—of one of the German gases. Either Sarin or Tabun. Possibly their own combination of the two, in modified form. We call them GB and GA.

The machinations of the human brain are awesome—and sometimes ridiculous. There I was being dragged up to that mouldering old house—so there was going to be a body in the manse (mine)—and I was remembering a professor at the War College lecturing on the organo-phosphates.

“The passage of an electric impulse through a nerve involves the chemical action of a substance known as acetylcholine. After each such impulse the chemical must be inactivated before another impulse can pass through. This is done by an enzyme called cholinesterase.

“Nerve gases affect this enzyme and stop it from doing its job. The nerves cannot be cleared for the passage of the next energy impulse. The victim is dazed and weakened or paralysed, or dies almost immediately. Depending on the dosage involved...

I could even remember the professor's name! Irwin. Dr. Irwin.

Dion Hermes took a breather. We were halfway up the back stairs of the house. He was taking me into the kitchen. There was a Detex key there, as I knew from making the round with Sarge. So? No help.

I was the latest thing in zombies—except that my brain was working overtime. That in itself made their gas a little different. This

sparked hope in me. How different? How much did Hermes know about what he was doing? About the gas? Had he mixed it himself? I doubted it. He had been given it and told how to use it.

A mild dose of GA or GB will wear off in a couple of hours.

Dion Hermes sighed, grunted as he picked up the rope and hauled me up the remaining steps and into the huge kitchen. Dark. The sort of dark a blind man must live in.

A candle flamed, piercing the gloom with a tiny yellow spear, and I saw his face as he held the candle up. That handsome face, soft around the edges, was streaming sweat. His hair was mussed and he was wearing a hairpiece that was slightly askew. He had taken off his dinner jacket and was working in his dress shirt, dirty and stained now, with the frills limp and the lacy cuffs bedraggled. His black bow tie was undone and dangling loose. A perfect thuggee cord. I couldn't move a muscle.

Now he bent over me and peered through a little puddle of saffron candle light. I stared at the candle without blinking. Even my eye muscles were paralysed.

I saw a white flash of capped teeth behind the candle flame. Dion Hermes said: "I know you can see and hear. I am perfectly familiar with the properties of the gas."

I hoped he wasn't too efficient, too observing. I stared at the candle, fighting off the urge to blink. Because I could blink again. The gas was beginning to wear off a little. How long would it take?

He straightened and rubbed his back. "You are an incredibly heavy man, do you know? Disposing of Roy was no task at all, compared to dragging your great lummoX of a body around. And the girl, our little Peter Pan, is as light as a feather. Really a sweet enough little thing, the girl. A pity she got mixed up in this horrible stew."

He had Peter Pan! Pat Kilbride.

He took the candle away from my eyes and then I let myself blink. I moistened my eyeballs slowly and with great effort, but I did blink. I concentrated on moving the little finger on my right hand. No deal. Nothing. My little spark of hope sputtered and nearly went out. It might be hours before I could move effectively again.

I didn't have hours.

Dion Hermes picked up the rope again. "I hope you don't mind my chatting as I work." His laugh was nasty, and for some reason I thought of all the rats in this old house. He didn't look like a rat. Not at all.

"Now to drag you up three flights of stairs," he said. "I am not looking forward to it, I assure you. A filthy task, really. Coolie's work. But then we can't always have things exactly to our liking in this harsh world. This unpleasant task has fallen to me—and so be it."

He kicked open a servant's door and began to haul me up the back stairs. It was rough going and it must have hurt me plenty. I couldn't feel it. I kept trying, with every ounce of will power in me, to move the little finger on my right hand. I tried. I tried! Nothing doing.

He stopped on every landing to rest and catch his breath. He kept talking, half whispering, all the while. His technique was to plant the candle on the next landing, then drag me up to it, then advance the candle again. I had noted, on the round with Sarge, that all the windows were heavily draped. Nobody was going to see a little sliver of candle flame.

Suddenly he nearly slipped. Or so I thought. And I very nearly slipped. I realized, just in time, that he was studying my face in the candlelight for some reaction. I didn't blink. The rest of my facial muscles were still paralyzed.

I barely moved the tip of my little finger on my right hand.

He was satisfied that the gas was holding. He chuckled. "Nearly slipped then, didn't I? Almost named a name. How very naughty of me."

I kept trying to move my little finger as he lugged me up the last flight of stairs, puffing and grunting. When we got to the last landing I could entirely flex the finger. But that was all. The hand was as dead as the rest of me.

He stood over me and patted away sweat with a handkerchief. "I wonder who you are. Really are? Too bad you can't be made to talk, but I am afraid there is not time for that. In any case I—we—have other plans. But it does seem a pity, you know, to kill a big handsome fellow like you." He mopped his chin, where a faint trace of fat was beginning to accrue. He would be in his late fifties. Younger than Rona Matthews.

I could move my right thumb now.

He was speaking to me again, but only half. As though he needed the sound of his own voice to give him courage.

There was another candle burning in the small room. The one window was thickly draped. Peter Pan lay on her back in the middle of the room. She was still breathing faintly. Her eyes were closed and she was as limp as a homemade doll. Her little Peter Pan hat was missing and her hair was badly mussed. Otherwise she appeared unharmed. One of her slim legs twitched and I knew she was drugged, not gassed.

Dion Hermes dragged me close to the girl and loosened the knot in the rope. He snaked it out from beneath me. My head had fallen so that I was looking directly at the girl.

"Mustn't leave the rope here," said Hermes from high over me. "A dead giveaway in case it doesn't burn. Such precise timing is

necessary. Dear me! I had no idea, no idea at all, that these matters could be so intricate.”

He was talking now to remind himself, to be sure he didn't forget anything. I could move the index finger on my right hand. Just a trifle. My breathing was better, too. It had been shallow, very shallow up till now. They had almost overdone the gassing. Nearly killed me. I had been wondering why they hadn't. Why all this trouble, all this rigmarole with Pat Kilbride and me? Why hadn't they simply killed us out of hand and tossed our bodies in the Pacific?

Bodies sometimes float. Tides bring them in and leave them on beaches. Bullets and knives leave wounds. Suspicious wounds start investigations.

So all right. That made sense. Yet Roy boy had tried to kill me with a Banker's Special. That made no sense at all. Unless Roy had been going against orders.

It was uncanny. He might have been looking into my brain, plucking the thoughts there.

“That Roy,” said Hermes, “was a cretin. A kill-crazy cretin. Going against orders and endangering us all—the entire operation. I'm so glad you killed him, whoever you are. It was a pleasure to hide him where he won't be found for a long, long time. Oh, a pleasure indeed. I never did like Roy.”

I understood that Roy, whatever else he might have been, had never “liked” Dion Hermes.

Silence. He breathed over me. The girl's eyes fluttered. She was starting to come out of the drug. I found myself hoping with all my heart that she wouldn't. If my sweat glands had been functioning I would have been streaming. I knew, knew, that this was going to be nasty beyond belief.

Even someone like Dion Hermes—I had him pegged by now as amoral and a constitutional psychopath, concealed all these years—even someone like Hermes had to gird himself to do certain things. He was stalling.

I could move my right foot.

He mumbled to himself. “Hmmm—let me see. I have the badge? Yes. And the tear, in the tunic won't be noticed. Even if it is they won't be able to explain it. Powder burns on the tunic? Hmmm—I simply don't know enough about these things!” He was pettish now, the worried perfectionist.

“Better not take any chances,” he said. He tugged the agency tunic off me and went to a large closet and opened the door. My eyes could move enough to follow him. They did. Carefully. Trusting the bad light. I was still as helpless as a baby. If he suspected I had come back, just a little, all he had to do was gas me again or slip a needle into me.

There was another candle in the closet. It was on a box that stood in the midst of a litter of rags and crumpled newspapers that led in turn to a long row of garments hanging from wire hangers on a dowel rod. The clothing must have been there a long time, for years, shrouded in dust covers. They wouldn't have dared to plant it.

Somebody had cased this old house carefully, and recently, and had come up with a pretty foolproof plan.

I tried to clench my left hand. I could almost do it. Not quite yet.

I was breathing a lot easier now. I would die faster that way. They wanted that, had figured the gas mixture just right so my lungs wouldn't be completely paralyzed. I had to have smoke in my lungs. I had to die of lethal fumes, as did the girl. In most fires it was the fumes that killed, not the flames. They knew that. So would the firemen know it, and the police. And eventually, Hawk? I wondered if the old man would fall for it. I didn't think so. Hawk would avenge me. In time.

The girl opened her eyes and looked at me. She didn't know me. The drug was still heavy in her and she was glassy-eyed and in stupor. Her long legs twitched again. I was so placed that I could look directly into her eyes. For a moment I saw something there, some light of intelligence and recognition fighting to break through. She couldn't make it. She closed her eyes again.

Dion Hermes was still stalling. Still pushing away whatever horror it was that he must eventually commit.

I saw him glance at his watch. "Gracious! There is simply no more time. One must, one simply must, get on with it."

I recognized the setup in the closet for what it was—an old arsonist's trick with a few refinements. There was no metal involved. The candle would be special, slow burning, and it was stuck to the top of the wooden box. The box would burn. The candle would burn, what was left of it after the trick was worked, and though there might be residue it would take a sharp arson man to spot it. He would have to be looking for it. They were counting on the experts not looking. Why?

The candle had a slit in it halfway down. Wedged into the slit was an ordinary black powder fuse that led down to the pile of rags and papers under the clothing on the hangers. I could smell a little now, and I caught no hint of gasoline or turp. No cans. No lingering odors, except that of flaming wool. They were smart.

That clothing was old, probably of wool, and it would burn slowly and with a lot of smoke. They were counting on the smoke as the real killer. They were right, too, unless I could do something about it.

I couldn't. I could move a few muscles to a small degree, nothing more. I was helpless. And the time was gone now.

Dion Hermes made a last adjustment of the fuse. He took a folded packet from his pocket and sprinkled it around the end of the fuse where it ran into the crumpled papers and rags. Just enough to fizz and flash and that would be it. The rags and papers would catch. The garments dangling in the flames would catch. This old mansion was tinder-dry. Sarge had told me it was a fire hazard.

He came out of the closet, talking again, staring at me now. I hadn't yet made out the color of his eyes, but in the dim light they looked a washy brown. He pursed his puffy red mouth at me and smiled.

"I know you can hear me, Carter, and that you understand what is going to happen to you and the girl."

Carter!

He caught it, too, and for a moment dismay was etched on his handsome, epicene face. Then he shrugged. "What matter now? Who can ever know?"

"You must believe me," he went on, "when I tell you that I find this distasteful in the extreme. In the extreme!"

He pouted and shrugged again. "But it simply must be done. Must be! It is all a part of the plan and the plan must be carried out to the letter."

He stopped talking then, watching me with narrow eyes, and from his waistband he took a long knife. It looked like the one that Roy had used on me. It glinted in the candles.

"I do not enjoy this," he muttered. "I really don't. I have always dreaded violence."

He was lying. He was enjoying it. He was also dramatizing it, play-acting for me, an audience of one. I started to hate him then. Hate is verboten in my profession. It interferes with judgment, with cold objectivity. I hated him. I willed myself to get off the floor and kill him. I used all my will and all my brain power and I couldn't move. No important muscle would function.

I was dead. So was the girl. I knew it, admitted it.

He did it fast. He wanted to get it over with.

"There has to be blood," he said. "Blood in certain places, on both of you, in case you are found before the fire destroys your bodies. And you must, of course, be found in a certain compromising position. An ingenious plan, but nasty. It offends me. But it must be done."

He had forgotten me again and was talking to himself. He stepped over me and put the knife on the floor near the girl's legs. I stared, unblinking, and wondered that the rage, the cold fury in me, the revulsion, did not loose my muscles and give me strength to kill him.

He reached up under her tunic, got his hands into the waist of her Peter Pan tights, and pulled them down her legs and off. She muttered

something.

Pat Kilbride was wearing a brief pair of tight white pants. He tugged them off and she lay naked from the waist down. He moved up to tear open the little jacket. He got a hand into her bra and ripped it open. The good firm breasts fell out, milk white, the flesh gleaming in a patina of candlelight.

"We must," said Dion Hermes, "make it look like rape. That you attacked her brutally, monstrously, and when she fought you off you lost your head completely."

I was sick and I couldn't vomit. I am a big man, and a powerful one, and my whole body was in revolt. I sought to scream, to curse and made no sound. My shoulder and back muscles did tense, with some slight feeling, but I still could not change position. All I could do was watch. And hate.

Dion Hermes was sobbing now, panting and sobbing, and sweating. He grabbed her white legs and pulled them wide apart, then dropped them and turned to me. He got his hands under my armpits and dragged me over to her.

"You must be found on top of her," he mouthed in my ear. I could smell his scent and his sweat and his breath.

"With her blood on you. In the proper places."

He forced my lips apart and put something in my mouth. He tilted my head back so the pill would slide down my throat. "There," he said, "that'll get the proper chemicals working inside your body. When they find you, your cells will be brimming with sex." He chuckled. "Bet you never needed medicine to get going in real life."

I could not follow his movements now. My face was buried in the fragrance of her breasts. Breath rasped in her nostrils. She would die, as I would, of the deadly fumes. I had been raping her, so intent that I did not notice a fallen candle, the sudden blaze and smoke, and the fumes had overcome us before we could move.

It might not stand up under close scrutiny. But would there be close scrutiny? I thought not. It would be swept under the carpet. My name, and that of AXE, would be smeared forever. Me, a professional killer, gone berserk at last, reaching the breaking point and committing the foulest of all crimes. Branded as a blood-stained pervert. Hawk would not believe it. But Hawk would have to walk in the shadows and speak softly for a long time. The CIA would never let him forget.

I heard him strike a match and hold it to the candle in the closet. The arson trap was set.

He muttered to himself. "Hmmm—should burn for two hours before it reaches the fuse. Plenty of time to get to the airport. Everything must appear normal. And so it will—so it will. All worked

out beforehand. The Braniff charter takes off at four. Hmmm—just about right. The fire will be starting just as we leave the airport.”

Pat Kilbride moved under me. Just a quiver of movement, then she went lax again. I knew then that I could expect no help from her—she had a near lethal amount of the drug in her. I wondered what the drug was. It would be something hard to trace, even if anyone bothered to look. Count on them to think of that. It was the same with the nerve gas and the pill they used on me. They’d leave no traces.

I lay on the girl and listened and took it and hated him. And hated myself more. I had done this. I was responsible for this. I had failed in my job, failed miserably, been taken like a greenhorn, like a brand-new agent just out of training school and sopping wet behind the ears.

He was standing over us. I moved my left eye a trifle and saw his feet in shiny black pumps, the shiny stripe in his dinner trousers. The shoes had little bows on them.

Then he was gone. I listened to the quiet slip-slip of his evening pumps on the stairs, then heard a door open and close softly. Silence. The candle in the closet burned steadily with a clear unwavering flame.

I strained to look at my AXE watch. No good. I still couldn’t lift my head, or turn it. Pat Kilbride lay unmoving beneath me, breathing quietly.

I began an unceasing effort to move. My fingers were tingling and I could move all my toes now. Not enough. I kept trying.

I found that I could raise my head half an inch from Pat Kilbride’s soft breasts. That was all. Half an inch.

Two floors beneath me the front door slammed. The guard! I forgot and tried to open my mouth to yell. Nothing.

My heart was swollen. I thought it would choke me. And I raged. How I raged. Because I had the premonition.

I listened as the footsteps went into the kitchen. It wasn’t Sarge. He moved too slowly. Shuffled. One of the older men.

I heard another door open and shut. He was going down to check the basement, the boiler and laundry rooms, and then he would have to come up here to get the last key, the sixth key in the house, that was at the end of the corridor up front. It was near a ladder that ran up to a trapdoor into the attic.

He was bound to see the candles. He must. He would find us and it would be all right. The mission was blown to hell, of course, and Hawk would have to start all over again, but there was no help for that. We could nab Dion Hermes and company at the airport and, at the very least, charge him with attempted murder of the girl. Maybe he would talk about the TV transmitter in Peru, or maybe he wouldn’t, but Pat Kilbride and I would be alive. Alive! I would get another

chance at them.

The basement door in the kitchen slammed. The footsteps came back front, toward the wide stairs leading up. He still had one last key to check, the key that was going to save us. Dion Hermes hadn't bothered to close the door—or had he wanted a draft across the room?—and the candles would be showing faintly on the old parquet floors. The guard had to see it!

My mind was racing ahead. This mess had to be handled skillfully. I would drop out of it completely. AXE never wants any publicity. The CIA wasn't going to be happy, either, about a botched case and a wounded agent. I was so high that if I could have managed a grin I think I would have—Hawk would think it only fair that the CIA get the bad publicity. We did enough dirty jobs for them.

The front door slammed. Silence. I couldn't quite believe it, even as I died inside. He wasn't coming upstairs. He had skipped the last key. Goofed it. He was an old man and his feet hurt and he had trouble breathing and why walk up two long flights of stairs for nothing?

I tried to curse and found that my throat muscles had loosened a bit and I made a sound like a strangling ape. I was alone again. The candle burned lower.

The girl opened her eyes and stared up into mine. There was no intelligence in her eyes, only blankness. Then she passed out again.

So did I pass out. Just as I remembered something else the professor told us at the War College—any unusual strain or effort while under the effects of GA or GB will invariably result in a relapse into coma. Now I remembered. Just as I blacked out.

I came out of it to see the candle flame hovering just above the fuse. I had a couple of minutes, no more. Then the fire would start and I would hold my breath as long as I could and then I would have to breathe the fumes and I would die. The girl, still mercifully unconscious under me, would die too. The fire, beginning in the top of the house, as planned, would be quickly spotted and they would probably get here in time to snatch our only slightly charred bodies from the flames. So the story would begin and spread. And be hushed up for the good of the services involved. They would get away with it.

My muscles had come back a little while I was out. I put everything I had in it and rolled off the girl. Toward the door. I wouldn't risk rolling toward the closet and the box—I still couldn't use my arms and legs, or stand up. I could barely manage to roll over and that was it. All of it.

The fuse was embedded in the candle. I couldn't knock it loose. All I could do was knock it over and set the papers and rags off that much sooner. And yet—and yet I could roll into the box and knock the

candle off and hope it went out when it hit the floor. Hope it did.

I wasted a few seconds in deciding. I weighed it all and decided to roll toward the door. That was a good fat candle flame and chances were that it would not go out. So I would burn first, and fast, and that wouldn't save the girl or the mission.

I could move my head enough to watch the candle. Any second now. I managed to roll over again. Then again. I was halfway to the door now. Thump—thump— thump—thump—

It should be time for the guards to make another tour. Unless they had already been and gone, again without checking the third floor. I couldn't know. I was gambling all the way. Gambling that even after the fire started the girl might have a chance. She was a dozen feet from the closet and the clothing might burn slowly at first. The fumes would rise. She was on the floor and her drugged respiration was slight. There was a chance if I could get downstairs in time! I thought I might have anywhere between five and ten minutes' leeway.

As I rolled I tried to shout. Stronger,, but still ho good. All I brought out was ughh—guh—ugghhhaaa—

I was in the corridor now. I rolled toward the front landing and over the first step down. Like an old-fashioned roller coaster I slammed down, bumping and bouncing, getting a face full of lumps and splinters. I could feel a little pain now and I welcomed it.

I hit the landing and rolled to the next step. Rolled again. Down again. Wham-bang-slam-blam—

Blood was leaking into my mouth. I wasted a precious second trying to raise myself with my arms. No good. I rolled to the top of the last wide flight of stairs leading down to the front door. No landing. Just a long fall down shiny bare stairs to the parquetry of the foyer. How ironic if I broke my neck instead of burning to death.

I smelled the smoke then. The fire was going. And I heard her scream. Once. Not loudly. Just loud enough for me to hear it—a dying whimpering note, the cry of a lamb that sees the knife. She had come back enough to know what was happening to her.

I rolled over the edge and plummeted down the stairs. Falling and sprawling and banging and knocking myself silly. In the total dark it was a preview of tumbling into hell.

I banged my head on the newel post and went out for a minute. The light in my eyes brought me back. The gas was wearing off faster now.

Someone knelt beside me. I said: "Guuu—gurlll— owwww—uuuu—yo—up—up!"

His face was in the light and I saw that it was the old man, the one they called Simp, the one who claimed he had laid Rona Matthews. He looked at me in the harsh glare of the flashlight and I saw that I

wasn't getting through to him. I was coming back fast, but not fast enough.

I moved a hand. It actually moved. I grabbed at his knee. I pointed up the stairs. "G—gurllll," I said. "Firrrrr —fur—fire—fire—"

Smoke rolled down to us. He got it then and let out a yelp and played his light up the stairs. The thick smoke coiled and writhed in the bar of brilliance.

I hit his leg as hard as I could. I managed to lurch to my knees. I pointed. "Gg—go—gurl—dying—dave— dave—save her—gurllll—"

He was an old man and he wasn't very brave, but he got the point. He took off up the stairs, a handkerchief over his face, already coughing, and I rolled toward the open door. I got off the veranda on my hands and knees. I could crawl now, and I did, in the coolness of early morning and with the mist laving my face. I crawled toward the fence on the landward side of Rona Matthews' property. I remembered the car lights on Highway I. If I could get over the fence, or under it, and get to the highway and a phone I still had a chance of getting out of this mess without involving AXE and Hawk. It would be dirty. It would be filthy. But something could be saved. And I had a date in Peru.

I rolled. I crawled. I finally managed to get to my feet, fell on my face, gained a few yards, slid back a few, and somehow got to the fence. I went under it in the soft sand and staggered on toward the highway. Behind me the dark sky was stained scarlet as the old house died. In the east lay one lambent slice of false dawn. I staggered on, bleeding, beat-up, cut to ribbons, and hoped I wouldn't meet anyone. For their sake. I would scare them to death.

After so much bad luck it turned good. Nobody paid any attention to me. The beach house was deserted. Dion Hermes and Rona Matthews, with Li Tzu and the suckers, were on their way to Peru by Braniff charter. Only Sarge and his security men were around, and they had their hands full with the fire and the girl. The engines had to come a long way.

There was no traffic when I lurched onto the highway and fell on my face again. My legs were still rubber, but improving. I found a phone kiosk and blessed the company.

I actually had a dime, though my numb fingers dropped it four times before I got it into the slot. I dialed the Dire Emergency number.

Reply was instant. "Apex Exterminating. Who is calling, please?" It was a girl.

I still wasn't talking too good, so I went about it slowly, carefully, close to the mouthpiece.

"N3," I told her. "N3—tell Blackbird this is a Hatchet Escape priority. A triple Z. Plan Gamma."

She took it in stride. I counted. One chimpanzee, two chimpanzee, three chimpanzee, four, five chimpanzee, six chimpanzee, close the goddamned door!

Nine seconds later Hawk came on the line. I gave it to him fast. He listened, gave me an order and hung up. He was on his way.

I have, at various times, cussed and damned Hawk and called him a mean-tempered old bastard and other things even more unkind. But when you need him, he's there. He has a plan for everything—and the plans work.

An hour later we were on a plane for Mexico City. Not until we had boarded, and fastened our seat belts, did he tell me that Pat Kilbride was dead.

Chapter 6

It was an old Inca road. They had no wheeled vehicles, which will give you an idea. The last repair gang picked up its tools and departed about 400 years ago. I had followed it out of the valley of Cuzco, skirted the great plain of Anta, ran swiftly through a tropical belt aflame with flowers and about five billion green parrots, and gradually climbed to 15,000 feet. That was only a start. It was cold — not bitter, but cold—and the long johns felt good. The wind pushed me around a little and there was an occasional spate of rain. Clouds hung low, black and pregnant with storm, and shrouded the peaks in the long valley toward which I climbed. It had a Quechua name which translated, roughly, into: Valley of the Delightful Death.

Condor Crag, that gigantic monolith surmounted by a temple and palace complex, Was twenty miles down the valley. I figured I was ten miles from the narrow pass leading into the valley. Thirty miles to Dion Hermes. Rona Matthews. And Li Tzu and his little band of faithful suckers. I had watched, or heard, the helicopter from Cuzco arrive at and leave the Crag three times in the past twenty-four hours. Then the weather closed in.

Parts of the western slopes of the Andes are as lonely as Outer Mongolia. So far I had met exactly four Indians, all sullen and speaking Aymara, which I didn't, and all herding llamas on desolate punas. I followed Talbot's advice and did not linger. When I slept, which was very little, I was usually wakened by the scream of a mountain lion. Once, on a shelf of rock high over me, I saw a small herd of vicuna, a wild cousin of the llama.

So far the Toyota had performed miracles. Bennett was a good procurement man. The big jeep had four-wheel drive and creeper gear, and for my money it was better than any Land Rover I'd ever driven.

The Toyota had an ordinary dash radio, and Hawk could send me messages, in code, through Lima. They broadcast two news programs in English every day. I didn't dare carry a transmitter because of guerrillas—if they took me, a transmitter would stamp me as either CIA or Peruvian Army and they would shoot me. As a slightly kooky Peace Corps man who liked to climb mountains in solitude I just might get away with it. The chances were about fifty-fifty.

So far I hadn't had a smell of guerrillas. That didn't mean they weren't watching me. I didn't worry much about it.

I did have a portable TV set, an ordinary RCA with ears. Only these ears were a little different. I could flip a concealed switch and turn

them into a DF set. When I got the Neo-Com TV transmitter it came booming in loud and clear and the direction was no problem. The signal was coming from Condor Crag.

Talbot was right about something else, too. The ancient Inca road ended and I had myself on a llama track. It twisted like an insane snake, always climbing, across a near precipice dotted by huge boulders and paved with scree. The trail hung at a forty-five-degree angle and I knew the Toyota had had it. She was on the verge of going over half a dozen times before I quit. One good-sized rock under the left front wheel would do it and, as far as I could see in the rain and cloud, it was about 5000 feet to the nearest level spot. I was in no real danger. I could dive out and hang onto a boulder—but I would lose all the equipment. The guns and the explosives and the food and all the rest of it. I didn't much want to go wandering around the Andes with just the Luger and the stiletto.

I left the jeep parked at a steep angle against a granite slab as big as a house, and took what I needed. I knew the pass ahead was guarded by a rock facade, what the French climbers call a gendarme, and it was going to be a bastard to get around. Later I had to scale Condor Crag, with its nasty overhang, and that would be the real corker. I would probably have to do it at night.

Talbot had said: "The climbing stuff is just in case, Nick." Hah!

I was debating whether to wait where I was for Talbot and Bennett to catch up, or to go on to the pass and wait. They were supposed to be running about three hours behind me—their cover being that they were local Peace Corps men from Cuzco accompanying me on an inspection tour. Their jeep had broken down and I, being the impatient type, went on ahead. So far the elaborate cover story seemed a waste of time. Those Indians I'd seen hadn't asked for my credentials.

I decided to go ahead. The rain was increasing and it was getting colder. There would be cover in the pass, maybe a cave, and I could start a fire in this weather without much risk of being spotted.

I swung the pack on my back—a good ninety pounds or so—and picked up the Mannlicher-Schoenauer. A sweet gun, chambered for .458's. It lists for seven hundred bucks. Old Poindexter, AXE's chief armaments man, probably gets a discount.

The shots came from behind me. Four distinct rifle shots, then a rattle of machine-gun fire—sounding like an old Sten or an AK, the sound was distorted by rain and clouds—then two more rifle shots. Then silence. Bennett and Talbot hadn't been three hours behind me. And they were in trouble.

I had to decide fast. Go ahead? I had everything I needed to blow the transmitter and get back to the Toyota—after a little personal

business—and I didn't really need Talbot and Bennett. Hadn't really wanted them. But at times Hawk will go by the book, and this time he had. He insisted I needed cover.

But that gunfire meant trouble and I might as well find out how bad it was. And Talbot and Bennett might need me. I started back along that crazy, canting llama track, slipping on scree and clinging to boulders and straining to see into the rain and mist-fog-cloud ahead.

They couldn't have been more than half an hour behind me. How they gained so much on me I never did find out, and in the end it didn't matter. I got to the bottom of the col, left the llama track, and picked up the old Inca road again. I followed it for a mile, to where it dipped into a narrow ravine and switched sharply to the south. I had noted the spot before as a likely place for an ambush.

Nothing moved ahead of me. The wind was to me now, but I couldn't hear or smell anything. Visibility down here was about fifty yards. I didn't like it much.

I left the road and took cover in a tumble of boulders. Wild maize and puna grass grew high enough to shield a man on his belly. For fifteen minutes I hardly breathed. I listened. I heard an eagle's scream once high in the clouds overhead. That was all.

It took me the better part of an hour to belly my way around to the west of the ravine. I am a patient man when I have to be. As I got near the rim of the arroyo I heard someone moaning. A man. Speaking in English. It sounded like Bennett's voice, but so slurred by agony that I couldn't be sure. The voice kept repeating the same words over and over, never stopping.

"Help me—help me—someone please help me—help me— help me—someone please help me—"

It was Bennett. I was at the lip of the gully and could see the jeep. It was shot to hell, slewed sideways on the decayed old stones of the road. A miracle it hadn't burned. Bennett was lying on the road beside the jeep, face down. His legs jerked now and then and there was a lot of blood around his belly. He kept up the steady moaning. "Help me—help me—someone please help me—"

Talbot was still hunched over the wheel of the Toyota. One hand clutched the wheel, the other dangled outside the jeep. Half his head had been shot away.

I didn't move. I lay on my belly and kept my face down and listened. Nothing but the wind and the rain on the jeep top, and Bennett's moans. It was fairly clear in the ravine and I could see maybe a hundred yards. I still didn't like it. It smelled like trap to me.

Still I couldn't be sure. And I had to be sure before I could leave Bennett to die alone and in such pain. I knew the mission came first. It always does. I could leave Bennett there, and creep away to get my

job done, and nobody would ever censor me. Or even know. Except me.

I decided to risk it. See what I could do for Bennett. I slid down the steep bank and ran for the jeep, moving fast and zigzagging. Still I made a perfect target and if they were waiting to snipe me now was the time. My spine felt itchy and my belly was queasy, and it wasn't a case of soroche. Mountain sickness. I haven't been troubled with that since Tibet.

Bennett must have died just as I knelt beside him. His big body tightened in a final convulsion and he tried to raise his head. He knew someone was there.

He was badly gut-shot and had taken this long to die. Talbot was luckier. You don't suffer long with your head blown off.

I had seen all I wanted to, all I needed. There was a minor mystery here but I didn't have time to worry about it. I turned to get the hell out of there.

They let me take two steps.

"Alto! Stop! Put your hands up and do not move. Drop the rifle."

A woman's voice coming from somewhere along the eastern rim of the ravine. I had a strong feeling that I was about to meet El Rubio, and I remembered Bennett's leer and words. He had met her, all right, and he would never leer again.

I dropped the Mannlicher and put my hands up. They had me cold. I had taken a calculated risk and lost. And they were very, very patient.

Another voice, a man's, from the southern end of the ravine. "That's right fellow. That's perfect. Just make like you're a statue, fellow, and don't give us any trouble."

A white soldier of fortune. You meet all kinds in the high Andes.

I made like a statue, thinking hard and fast, as they left shelter and converged on me. The man who kept saying fellow was as big as me. He had a flat face and big square white teeth. His head was shaved and he was wearing a chullo, the local knit cap with ear flaps. And Bennett's brand-new Vietnam combat boots.

He was mean. Everything about him was mean. He was half drunk and when he got close enough, and spat, I saw that he was chewing a quid of coca, a narcotic. He stopped a dozen feet away and covered me with the machine gun. I had been wrong about it—it was an old Thompson, Chicago type with a drum magazine.

"I'll cover him, Jorge. You get the things we need from the jeep. Hurry. There is no time to waste here."

She snapped the words at him in rapid Spanish. High, Castilian Spanish. The words and her manner told me who the boss was. Not that I had doubted it. This had to be El Rubio—the blonde one.

Jorge slung the tommy gun over his shoulder, I thought reluctantly, and went to the jeep. He pushed Talbot and the dead man sprawled out onto the road. Jorge started to ransack the jeep, keeping an eye on me and the girl.

She kept her distance and covered me with a Colt .45. The old 1911 model, U.S. Army, and a lot of gun for such a little girl. I didn't let that fool me. I knew she could use it. Bennett, and Talbot had told me a lot about El Rubio.

She was not a lady to waste words. Her small hand holding the .45 rock-steady on my belly, she said, "Your name, please?" Her English was excellent. Educated English. College and finishing-school English learned in the States and/or Europe.

I told her I was Richard Winston. That was the name on my papers. I gave her the Peace Corps con. She smiled like Mona Lisa and her grip tightened on the gnurled butt of the big :45.

"Let us not begin our relationship with lies, Mr. Carter. We know you are Nick Carter and that you hold the rank of Killmaster in the AXE organization. There will be time to speak of all that later—right now we must get away from this place. Occasionally the Peruvian Air Force will send a patrol over this sector. We mustn't be caught out in the open."

"No," I agreed solemnly. "We wouldn't want that. But in this weather?" The garua, the mist, was setting in heavily now as the rain slacked off.

"It is going to clear up. Jorge says so, and Jorge is never wrong about the weather."

Jorge came back then, laden down with spoils from the jeep. Guns, ammo, food, binoculars and map cases, the dead men's personal belongings. He looked like a big packhorse. He pointed the Tommy gun at my belly again and said, "Better search him now, Inez. Even a big man like him can't keep his hands up forever."

She was fast and very deft. She took the Luger from my shoulder clip and the stiletto from the chamois sheath. She let me keep the sheath. She half smiled again as she took the stiletto. "Strange weapons for a Peace Corps man to be carrying, Mr. Winston."

She was very close to me, to one side so she wouldn't block Jorge's fire. I could smell the sweet flesh of her. As she patted my body and reached for the stiletto she whispered: "Be very careful. Don't antagonize Jorge. He's high on beer and coca, and he wants to kill you. Very careful!"

Why had she warned me? How did she know. I was Carter? How much did she know about AXE? And what was the relationship, at the moment, between her and Jorge?

I didn't have time to think about it. Jorge put away his canteen of

chicha, a native beer, jerked the Tommy gun at me. "March, fellow. Back the way you came. You can keep your hands down, but don't you try any funny business."

He looked at El Rubio. "Burn the jeep?"

"No. Leave it. There is a lot to salvage yet if we can ever get back here. Come on. Marche pronto!"

I went ahead, back along the way I had come. They followed, not too close but close enough, gabbing so furiously in Spanish that I couldn't follow it all. What I did catch was not reassuring—Jorge wanted to kill me, El Rubio wanted to wait awhile. I was important. I could be used. I could always be killed later. I knew then that the relation between Jorge and the girl was very important. To me. Life-or-death important!

Some of it, not much but some, was beginning to fall into a logical pattern. The ambush, for instance. They wanted me. So they had let me pass and waited for Talbot and Bennett. They were betting I would hear the shots and come back to investigate, and they had been very sly and patient. As any good guerrilla experienced enough to stay alive has to be. Their patience and skill had paid off. Here I was.

We got back to my Toyota and I became the packhorse. They both knew their stuff. They went through the Toyota and found every built-in secret compartment. The plastic explosive and detonators brought a roar of laughter from Jorge.

"Fellow, you Peace Corps boys sure haul funny cargo! What were you going to do—blow up a co-op? Maybe a rabbit hutch?"

El Rubio examined the portable TV and gave me that Gioconda smile again. "Very strange, Mr. Winston-Carter." She tilted the rabbit ears on the set: "There is no TV up here in the Andes. Only in Lima. How do you account for that?"

Jorge glared at me over his canteen as he drank chi-cha. "Why don't you cut out all this bumf and level with us, fellow? You're after that TV transmitter on the Crag, same as we are. I know it. That's the only reason you aren't dead now, fellow. Maybe you can help us blow that thing. Then I kill you." He patted the Tommy gun with a hand as big as a tennis racket.

El Rubio was frowning at him. She looked worried, yet her voice was calm enough when she said, "You are talking too much, Jorge. Much too much. Anyway, this is not the place or time. We must get under cover. Let's move out now."

It was a command, and Jorge knew it and didn't like it. He spat coca juice—he was drinking and chewing the narcotic at the same time—and rolled his yellow-streaked eyes at her. I could sense the hatred in him. She was a woman. I sensed lust, too. It was in the way he looked at her, and suddenly I knew that she had a problem. Or did

she? For all I knew they were lovers.

I wondered who Jorge really was. I didn't think he was a bandit, not in any real sense. He was pretty mangy.

There was nothing mangy about El Rubio. I could guess at the slim model's figure under the ragged OD pants, the Army shoes, the sweater and dirty alpaca jacket. Her hands and nails were clean, the nails neatly trimmed, and I wondered why she bothered in the mountains. Her hair was silver blonde, clipped mannishly close to her head against lice. Easier to wash, too. It looked clean now and, when she had whispered close to me, it had smelled the same way. Clean.

Her face had a fragile but authentic beauty. The little chin was firm, the nose patrician, the eyes large and a clear, light gray. The bulges beneath the alpaca jacket said that her breasts were on the large side. I noticed that Jorge, when he wasn't drinking or spitting or muttering, kept staring at her breasts. She noticed it too. And she noticed that I noticed.

We moved out, after some haggling about the line of march. She wanted Jorge to go first, with me in between and herself bringing up the rear. That might have given her a minute to talk to me alone. I wondered if she had that in mind. Jorge must have wondered, too, because he wouldn't buy it. He was getting drunker and higher on coca and more surly by the minute.

I went first, ten yards ahead of them, carrying the heaviest load. Jorge took real pleasure in loading it on me. Finally she had to order him to stop.

"Even a pack mule is no good if you break its back," she snapped. "That's enough, Jorge! I'll carry the TV set."

I sweated. If I hadn't been in top condition, in spite of the booze and women like Kezia Newmann, I might easily have died on that last mile up to the pass. I was carrying close to two hundred pounds, in thin air, and now I could feel the soroche coming on. I vomited a little and my head throbbed like a bongo drum. I felt like hell. Then I thought of Talbot and Bennett lying back there and I felt better. I still had a chance. Something, I didn't have any real idea as to what, or why, was due to pop between Jorge and El Rubio.

I intended to take advantage of it. It was the only chance I had.

Chapter 7

It gets dark early in the Andes in winter. It also, as Hawk would put it in his archaic slang, gets as cold as a well-digger's ass. We had a good fire going in the cave and the front of me was comfortable enough. My rear was freezing. The fact that I was tied hand and foot didn't help my circulation any. Jorge was a good man with knots. If it hadn't been for the razor blade clutched in my half-frozen right fist—my hands were tied behind me—I would have conceded that my chances were nil. They were pretty slim as it was.

But I did have the razor blade. Gem type. Single edge. My worst fear was that I would fumble and drop it. My fingers were icicles. I didn't dare use the razor blade yet because I figured Jorge was sure to make a final inspection of my bonds before he turned in. If he ever did. Right now he was drinking chicha and chewing coca and getting meaner by the minute. Tension was building between Jorge and the woman and it was going to blow any minute. I was not as happy about it as I might have been in other circumstances. I was in the middle. One of them was going to be dead pretty soon, and unless my luck held and the timing was exactly right, so was I.

I was on El Rubio's side for the moment. She had slipped me the razor blade while pretending to inspect Jorge's knots. So she was on my side for the moment. By giving me the blade she committed herself. I didn't know why and at the moment I wasn't worrying about it. First things first—like staying alive.

I had learned a lot in the few hours since they'd suckered me at the shot-up jeep. Some of it made sense. A lot more didn't.

Now I nodded at the thing under a tarp near the low entrance to the cave.

"Why don't you get rid of that thing? Bury it. Or cover it with rocks. Build a cairn."

Jorge rolled his eyes at me. He was getting on a rock ledge off to one side, drinking chicha and balancing the Tommy gun on one knee so it covered both me and the woman. His fingers looked as big as bananas and they kept moving around the trigger guard.

"What the matter, fellow? That stuff bother you? Or is it just the way that stiff looks that bothers you? I admit it ain't very pretty, fellow, but if you're ambitious and want to bury Dario with your own little hands I can arrange it, maybe. You want that, Mr. Nick Carter, I sure as hell arrange it. I even give you some inspiration to dig." He nudged the ugly snout of the machine gun at me.

I didn't want that. If Jorge untied me he would find the razor

blade. Then he would kill both of us as fast as he could. Me and El Rubio. He meant to do it anyway, but for some reason he was stalling, putting it off. I thought I knew the reason, but I was only guessing. Meantime the situation was ticking like a bomb. That was why I was shooting off my mouth—trying to keep the bomb from going off until I was ready.

I shrugged. “Forget it. I don’t feel like digging. Any chance of getting any of that chicha?”

He held up his canteen and grinned. His very own, personal, little brown jug. “Not a chance in the world, mister.”

Inez Graunt—her real name—was watching us as she cleaned her nails. She had just finished combing and brushing her clipped, silver-blond hair. She was a cool cookie. She knew about the bomb, too, but she acted like she was sitting in her drawing room in the family mansion in Lima.

“You agree, Mr. Carter, that our compadre was killed by some unusual weapon? Possibly a laser gun?”

He sure had. I had seen a demonstration of the Dick Tracy toy a year before at Fort Belvoir. They used a live goat. The result was about the same. ZAP—nothing left but a skeleton and some charred flesh. Only one thing against the Army lasers—they had a very short range and could only zap once. It took a long time to recharge them.

Jorge stared at the woman. “You remember how long Dario take to die, Inez?”

“I remember, Jorge. You were magnificent. No one but you could have done it. But that is over now, Jorge. We failed and lost everyone. Now we’ve got to try again and succeed. That transmitter must be blown.”

She gave me a dead-pan look and traced a finger down her straight little nose. “With the help of the great Nick Carter, Jorge, we might do it this time. For once AXE and—and our people want the same thing. We can work together.”

“Can we? Can we, now?” Jorge was watching her with an odd expression on his flat, ugly face. For the moment he had forgotten me. The angle was bad, the firelight dim, and I couldn’t read his face. His voice said it all: anger, doubt, mistrust, fear. And something else. Something I was counting on. Lust for her body. More. Lust to degrade and destroy that body.

I played a hunch and didn’t wait after all. I manipulated the razor blade in my stiffened fingers and began to work on the cord.

El Rubio was desperately fending off the showdown. She knew I couldn’t help her yet. She couldn’t even be sure that I would help her. She was a gambler, too.

Also an actress. A good one. She pretended she hadn’t heard

Jorge's last words. The gauntlet had been thrown but she didn't see it. She was very careful not to move her hand toward the Colt .45 on her hip. She was buying minutes. Maybe seconds. I sawed away with the razor blade. It was slow going.

Jorge was caught in a dilemma universal to all men. He wanted to kill her. Yet he didn't want to kill her. He wanted to trust her and knew he couldn't. His instincts told him to pull the trigger and rip her apart with the Tommy gun. Now! He was on the brink. I had been watching them and listening for hours, and I had it pretty well figured and right now, this very second, El Rubio was one breath away from getting her little belly full of iron.

One of the cords on my wrists fell away.

Jorge, the Tommy gun alert, drank chicha and wiped his mouth with his hand. He dribbled coca juice. El Rubio, cool as ice, stood up and sauntered toward the cave entrance.

"Where you going, honey?" A new role for Jorge now. He was purring. Purring and mocking.

She still played it straight. She looked surprised and then smiled at him. "Where am I going? Jorge, please! Que le pasa a usted? I'm going to the latrine, of course. Now, if you don't mind—"

Jorge smiled too. His big teeth flashed in the gloom. "I do mind, Inez. I mind a whole lot. You ain't going no place, honey, no place at all. You know why—because you get out in the dark you might not come back. You just might decide to go back up Condor Crag and visit your friends again, like you done the other night when everybody got killed 'cepting you and me. No, honey. You stay here."

It was in the open now. I sawed away with my razor blade, careful to mask my hand movements, and watched and listened in fascination. One thing I had in my favor—Jorge was so choked with cold rage and perverted lust that he barely remembered my presence.

The woman gave him a cold stare, then threw up her hands in a little gesture of despair.

"You've gone crazy, Jorge. Lost your mind completely. That is the only explanation I can think of for this demonstration. But I can understand—we have both been under a terrible strain. Terrible. That awful trip down from Bolivia. Then the ambush the other night, losing all our people—it's a wonder one of us hasn't cracked before. But you must try to pull yourself together, Jorge. You must! I'm sure they'll understand in Havana and—"

Jorge moved like a cat. He pounced at her, slapped her hard across the face and snaked the automatic from its holster in the same motion. He jammed the muzzle of the Tommy gun into her soft breasts.

"Havana will understand, all right: They'll understand when I tell them, not you. Because you ain't going to be calling Havana again,

honey. Never again you ain't."

He glanced at the transmitter in a corner of the cave. It was an old American job, an SC 12, and useless because the batteries had failed on the trek down from Bolivia.

He brought the Tommy gun up slowly and leveled at her belly. A big finger caressed the trigger. Then he smiled and chuckled, the way a drunk does sometimes, and his tone softened. He knew he had the situation under control now, and he was glad the cat and mousing was over. His big teeth flashed and his lips smacked and he was damned near genial. Except for his cold eyes. He went back to sit on his ledge. The fire smoked badly. The Tommy gun glared at us.

"Ugly I am," said Jorge. "Fool I have been. Not now. Not anymore, Inez. Night before last was the last straw. El colmo! You disappear for an hour. You are lost. That is possible, I admit it. But when you come back you have tobacco on your breath. Only I smell it, but I smell very, good. I have a fine nose. Then, up there on the crag, we walk into an ambush. All are killed, zapped by the laser guns. All but you, Inez. And ine—because I am so close to you. I do not get zapped and I carry Dario back down the crag and I do not let you get out of my sight again. And you know I am suspicious, Inez. You watch me. I watch you. We watch each other. It is a pretty bad situation, eh?"

"Basta," she snapped. She nodded at me. "Carter is listening to every word you say. He is the enemy, Jorge, not me. You have everything wrong, all mixed up. There are many things that you do not understand."

He did not bother to glance at me. I was through another strand of cord now.

The ugly face was bitter. "I did have everything wrong. I admit that. You were in command. I was to obey orders. You had the secret instructions from Havana. None of us knew why we were sent down into Peru. Only you. Then something happens to the radio batteries. They fail. This does not happen before. But this time it happens— and you have acid burns on your fingers."

She was as cold as a block of ice. She held out two fingers on her right hand and stared at them. "You know I burnt myself." She looked at me and smiled faintly. Some woman. Guts she had. And she never gave up. "I forgot to read the fine print. I told you that, Jorge. A folder of matches exploded in my hand. We still had cigarettes then and I was lighting one and—"

"I know," Jorge said. "Luis saw you. Poor Luis, who now lies up on the crag. Zapped. You did not see Luis, but he saw you, and he told me about it. Luis was estupido, as we both know, but even, he wondered why you would burn your fingers on purpose. But one burn covers another, eh? You could not explain acid burns, Inez, because

you had no business around the batteries. That was the work of Pablito—also now dead on the crag.”

She was silent, aloof, full of contempt. Very much the lofty Spanish lady. I kept sawing away. Timing was going to be important. And yet things were not as tight as they had been. Death not as imminent. Jorge, full of chicha and high on coca, and beguiled by his own voice and performance, was putting her on trial before me. Stretching the thing out. I had a chance. Nothing like fifty-fifty, but still a chance.

Jorge drank again and waved the canteen at me. He lit one of my cigarettes and blew the smoke at her.

“All these are little things, Inez. Not really very important. That you have tobacco on your breath when the rest of us have been out of tobacco for a week. That you burn your fingers to cover acid burns—because you have ruined the batteries so I cannot call Havana, or even Bolivia, and question your orders and your secret instructions.” He turned to me and his grin was feral. “You know what those secret orders were, Carter! You’ll be flattered, fellow. They concerned you. You were on your way here and were to be intercepted, captured, but not killed. How about that, fellow?”

I nodded. “I’m for it. Remember—captured but not killed. Why don’t you listen to your boss there and carry out those orders exactly. Stay out of trouble with the Beards in Havana.”

He spat a dark stain of coca. Grinned again. “You would like that, hey, fellow. You know when she told me about the secret orders, when she let me in on the big secret? Last night. Only last night. When she knew that something was wrong and I was suspicious. So she makes a big deal of it and lets me in on things—because she knows that you are coming and when we get you it is going to make her look better. What she really wants to do is kill me—only I never turn my back on her and I never sleep and she can’t be real sure just how much I know. She waits. I wait. We play cat and mouse!”

The canteen was empty. He hurled it at her head. She moved only slightly and it missed her and she showed her perfect white teeth in contempt.

“Fool! Estupido—you have it all wrong. Everything. All backwards.”

Jorge, never taking the Tommy gun off her, fumbled in his pack and came up with a fresh canteen of beer.

“But not so stupid that I don’t know where those secret orders came from. And that you got them the night before last, during the raid on the crag, when you got ‘lost’ for an hour. When you smoked a cigarette. Who gave you that smoke, Inez? The same man who gave you the secret orders about Carter here?”

Dion Hermes! Had to be. He had called me Carter in the old house

at Malibu. It had seemed like a slip of the tongue at the time. Hermes had been complaining about his dirty job, about having to obey orders he didn't like. He was just a flunky, an underling. But was he? Why couldn't he be the head guy for the whole Neo-Com setup on the West Coast? In the States, for that matter? He was a smart queer and a good organizer. He'd gotten Rona Matthews to make the tapes. He had old Li Tzu to con the suckers and run the retreat on the crag as a front for the laser TV. It figured. Dion Hermes was a lot bigger than I had thought—he was either a big shot Neo-Com or he was a private businessman selling efficiency for a fortune. The Neo-Coms had dough. How much were they paying Dion Hermes as an organizer and advisor?

I didn't buy it. It looked okay from one angle, but something was wrong with it. And it wasn't that I was alive when Hermes expected me to be dead—he could have been warned, about that in a number of ways, probably had a man checking the fire to see if they carried out my body. No. It was something else and I couldn't put my finger on it.

Jorge half-drained the canteen with one swig. I wondered how he stayed on his feet. When he looked at the woman again his expression was sad and, though I was prepared for almost anything by now, I was still surprised when I saw the tears in his eyes. And heard them in his voice. It looked like the beginning of a crying jag.

My hands were free now.

Tears ran glistening down his flat cheeks. But it wasn't a crying jag. Jorge was drinking himself sober. That meant I had to hurry and make my move. With my legs tied.

"I am as bad as you," he told the woman. "Maybe I am worse. Because I think you are a traitor to Cuba and I try not to think it. Then I know you are a traitor and I try not to believe it. I, Jorge Ismael—I did not let myself know that you were a traitor because I was in love with you. And you, you beautiful bitch, knew that and took advantage of it."

Suddenly he put a big hand to his face and raked down with his nails. Blood, rich-red and thick, oozed in the furrows.

"Love?" he shouted. "Not love. No love—just a damned fool who wanted to bang a beautiful woman and forgot everything else. You were smart, Inez, Inteligente! You knew that as long as you let me screw you I wasn't going to ask too many questions."

I said she was one hell of an actress. She was good. She went white, livid, and jumped to her feet as her eyes cut him to ribbons.

"Embustero! Liar! You never touched me. Never! Never—never—never. I would die first! I—"

This was all for my benefit, and I appreciated it. This was a great talent.

Jorge brushed away a fat tear. He looked a little ridiculous—if a drunken, half-crazy man with a loaded Tommy gun can be said to look ridiculous.

“I do not lie, Inez, and you know it. It does not matter. You know how many times you came into my bed to keep me quiet, to keep me from thinking too much. And you will die. Soon, now. But not until I have you again. On the floor of this cave and in front of Carter. I want him to see you degraded. I wish I could leave him alive, to tell others, but I will have to kill him after I have used him. Carter and I are going to blow that TV transmitter, you see? I put a gun in his back and he’ll help me. We’re going to wreck that installation on Condor Crag, and wreck it good. Just what you didn’t want, Inez. What you have been trying to prevent!”

She had some color back and was sitting again. She glared at him, sullen and haughty.

“You are a poor idiot, Jorge. What is that last supposed to mean?”

Jorge shook his head slowly. “No use, honey. No use at all. You ain’t conning me with that body no more, and I am going to kill you—after I’m through with you. I told you all them little things didn’t matter none—and it wasn’t them that convicted you.

“I know what those secret orders really were, honey. They told me in Havana so I could check against what you did. And you made the same mistakes that all you lily-fingered Commies make—you think that because a man can’t talk good, or ain’t been to school, that he’s got to be dumb. The real trouble is—you ain’t even a Commie. Not a real one! I expect your Russky bosses know that, and they put you out in the boondocks so if you get captured or killed it don’t matter much. You been blown for a long time, honey. You’re KGB, working for Moscow. You don’t want that transmitter blown!”

That nearly licked her. She stared at the floor of the cave and I could see her hands trembling. She could feel the lead tearing through her. She was close to giving up. In defeat, humbled and beaten, she was somehow more beautiful than she had been before.

Jorge poured it on. He was sobering up fast now. Some men can do that, and he was one of them. I moved my legs an inch and felt the cramps and pain. He never glanced at me. I moved my legs another inch. My hands were free and I had feeling back in my fingers. My Mannlicher was leaning against the cave wall near the entrance.

El Rubio put her hands to her face and sobbed. Maybe it was a real sob. She was in the spot for it. But she was watching me through her fingers. She must have had a conventional Catholic upbringing, before she cut loose from her family, and I wondered if she still knew how to pray, or maybe she was smart enough to know that God couldn’t do her much good in a spot like this. She was depending on me. The

razor blade had been in the nature of insurance.

"I ain't just another dumb man," Jorge was saying. "You think I'm just another guerrilla lieutenant, but the truth is I work for Cuban Intelligence. Rank of Major."

If she continued to do her part I might have a chance. Otherwise no. Unless she helped, he would nail me with a stream of machine-gun slugs before I touched the rifle. But. if I got to it I had a chance. The safety was off. I had had it off when they took me and I had watched sharply and Jorge hadn't snapped it on safety at the time. Chances were that he had forgotten and that it was still off safety. I was betting on it. One of those trifles that decide if you live or die.

Now Jorge walked toward her. She sat unmoving, her face buried in her hands, staring down at the dirt floor of the cave.

Good. He was closer to her now. Get ready, Carter.

"I just had me an inspiration," said Jorge. "And it is a beautiful thing. You know what I'm gonna make you do, honey?"

She knew, and this time she wasn't faking the disgust and horror and fear on that lovely face. This was no play-acting.

She bit him. She must have bitten all the way through, her sharp little teeth meeting in his flesh, because he let out a banshee scream of pain and rage and struck savagely at her head with his left hand. He didn't fire.

I thrust with my bound legs and dived for the Tommy gun. I fell two feet short, on my hands and chest, and did some mad scrabbling. I snatched at the Mannlicher, rolled once, felt that the safety was off, and started firing from a prone position in the flickering bad light. I was cold all over and sweating like a horse. I know what a burst of .458's can do to a man.

El Rubio brought it off. She reacted up and grabbed the muzzle of the Tommy gun and put her weight on it. Jorge was in a bind. He couldn't let go of the machine gun and he didn't have time to club her off with his left hand. She stuck like a leech, fighting for her life.

But she was in the way. I had to head-shoot in that stinking bad light and I only had a tenth of a second. I got lucky.

The first .458 slug took Jorge at the bridge of his flat nose and blew out the back of his head. I got him again, twice, in the chin and thorax, before he dropped the Tommy gun and started to crumple forward on the girl. He gushed blood from the mouth.

She ducked out from under him. She had the Tommy gun. As the sound of the firing trembled away I heard her cursing. Spanish aristocrat turned Commy she might be, but she had never learned those words in a drawing room or at a Party meeting.

Screaming like an insane woman, she fired the Tommy gun into Jorge's big body. It didn't matter that he was already dead. He leaped

and quivered and trembled in an imitation of life as she ran the drum out. Or very nearly out. I was watching for that.

I figured there to be about ten left in the drum. As she started to turn I said: "Don't turn around! Drop it."

She nearly gambled again. I could see her leg and buttock muscles quiver. She tensed and hesitated. She was probably cursing herself. If she hadn't taken that insane revenge on a corpse she might have killed me.

I didn't want to kill her. I thought I might need her to get up the crag in the dark. I was going. Tonight.

"Don't do it," I told her. "I'll just have to blow out your spine. That would be a shame—it's a very nice spine."

I extended the first tentative hint. I already knew what she was thinking, and how she would try to play it, and I wanted her to believe that she had a chance. They always try it. The sex gambit. If you play along a little it makes them easier to handle.

She dropped the Tommy gun. It fell into Jorge's blood, squashing one of his outflung hands.

She was an actress again now. She flounced her head, patted her silver-blond hair and stared straight ahead. Her voice was back in its normal register, firm and under control.

"You were marvelous, Mr. Carter. Superb shooting. I thank you for saving my life. May I turn around now?"

Her tone said that I was to be treated as an equal. She was a lady and I was a gentleman and never mind our basic political disagreement. I knew that dead Jorge had been right about her: She was a theoretical Communist who probably imagined she was paying off a debt by shaking her family and joining the Party. The family money bothered her, made her feel guilty. Maybe one of her ancestors had cut Inca throats.

"You may not turn around now," I told her. "Go over against that wall, where the big rock is, and sit on the rock with your face to the wall of the cave. Keep your hands over your head, Inez, and 'don't try to take me. I don't want to kill you.'"

Her laugh was brittle. "I don't seem to have gained a lot, do I, Mr. Carter?"

"Depends on how you look at it. You're still breathing. Now do as you're told and shut up."

She sighed. And spat on Jorge's body. "Oh, very well. But I am disappointed in you, Mr. Carter. I thought you were at least a gentleman."

"Jorge was a gentleman, too," I said. "In a way you wouldn't understand. And look what happened to Jorge."

I had a knife from Jorge's belt and was sawing at the ropes binding

my ankles. They fell away and I stood up. Needles of pain stabbed me as the blood ran back into my feet.

She was on her rock now, hands over her head, staring at the cave face. "I'm very tired. Can't I please put my hands down?"

"Not yet."

A sob crept into her voice. I was an ungrateful bastard. "It was I who slipped you the razor blade, Nick! If I hadn't you would be dead now."

"Wrong. You would be dead. Jorge was going to save me, remember? To help him do the job on the crag. You slipped me the blade because you were afraid of him. Scared you couldn't handle him. Which you couldn't, as it turned out. I saved your skin, Inez. So we're even on that."

I worked fast. I smashed every gun in the place and dropped it down a deep dark hole in one corner of the cave. Former dwellers in the cave had been doing it for centuries and it was still a long way down. I counted six before I heard the Tommy gun hit bottom. I tossed in all the ammo. I knew I couldn't trust her and I meant to be sure that I had the only gun. The Luger. I kept that and the stiletto in the arm sheath. Five spare clips. If I had to go up against lasers, the rifles and Tommy gun wouldn't be much help.

I took a fast look at the radio receiver and transmitter. Maybe the batteries from my TV set would power it, maybe not. That could wait.

She heard me smashing up things and half turned. "Please! My arms are falling off. Can't I—"

"Right," I said. "Come over here, close to the fire, and take off your clothes. All of them."

Chapter 8

She didn't give me any argument. She walked to the fire and started to strip. Her mouth quirked in a little cat smile, and she came in as loud and clear as the Neo-Com TV: Was I really sucker enough to fall for the sex bit?

I sat a dozen feet away on a rock and covered her with the Luger. "Just don't make any sudden movements," I warned. "Keep your hands in sight. Move your fingers slowly. Let me enjoy this."

She narrowed her eyes at me. "I think you are enjoying it!"

"Just a dirty old voyeur at heart. Let's go. Get those pants off. Slowly."

I was right in my first estimation of her body. Under all the heavy clothing was a sylphlike slenderness. Slim legs, tiny waist, flat belly. Thin arms and big firm breasts.

Just below her crotch, in a garter holster, the black butt of the tiny Webley winked in the dying firelight. A Lilliput. Very deadly at close range.

"HMMMM—how interesting. Useful little gadget. Put your hands up again,"

I unbuckled the little holster and let it slide down her leg. She shivered as my fingers touched her inner thigh. Her eyes were closed. I tossed the Lilliput into the trash hole and counted six. Tinkle.

Our eyes met. "That's a long way down," I told her. "Keep it in mind."

She closed her eyes again and when she spoke there was a new quality in her voice. Genuine. She wasn't faking or acting now. The words came out painfully, distorted by the tension in her, and the good big breasts moved up and out, up and out as she thrust them at me. She arched her back and let her head fall to one side.

"I'm terribly excited," she said. Her tongue got in the way and she could hardly pronounce the words. "Blood .—killing—always does this to me. Really! I—I'm not faking it, Nick."

I watched her. I believed her.

She grabbed her breasts with her hands. "Well? Aren't you going to do something about it?"

I wanted to. How I wanted to! But I was working and she was dangerous. So I would just have to ache for a while.

"Sure," I said. "I'm going to do something. Later." My eyes roamed over her body. She was clean. No hidden weapons.

"Get dressed," I snapped at her again. "Then fix us something to eat from those cans. Make some coffee."

Her nipples were taut with cold. The slim white body was beginning to goose-pimple. She licked her lips and stared at me as though she still couldn't believe it. I was having trouble believing it myself. I wanted her. My body screamed yes; my brain yelled no.

I gave her my ugly look—the way I felt—and moved the Luger suggestively. “Get on with it! Fast. Now! And don't make any mistake, Inez. I'll kill you just as fast, and just as dead, as Jorge was going to.”

She let out a great shuddering sigh and caressed her body with the tips of her fingers. Looked at me again. I moved the Luger and scowled. She gave up and began dressing.

That look was the message. She really hated me now! I was more than just a political enemy. It was a personal hate now. That would make her a tougher nut to crack. I had an answer for that, too, though I didn't really want to do it. Quasi-sadist I may be, but I do not enjoy torture.

She was pale and silent as she fixed us a meal. Bennett hadn't done such a good job on the rations, though I supposed he was trying to stay in character. We had cold Ks and some canned G rations and powdered coffee. Old and stale. There was a carton of Inca cigarettes. Peace Corps people make a big deal out of living on the same level as the natives they serve. That level isn't very high.

While she worked I dragged Jorge into a corner out of the way. I would have taken him outside but I couldn't leave her alone in the cave. I didn't know how long they had been using it. She might have something hidden around.

As we ate I started to question her. Hawk says I am pretty good at interrogation and he ought to know. He is the best. Anyway, along about the first cup of coffee, I knew she was starting to lie. I didn't say anything.

I snapped the stiletto down out of the sheath and put the tip in the fire. She watched me and her gray eyes widened and her mouth tightened and she kept glancing from the stiletto to the Luger in my hand.

“You're starting to lie to me,” I said then. “Cut it out You can't win, because you don't know how much I know. So every time you lie you're taking a chance that I'll catch you in it.”

I turned the stiletto in the fire. “And the first lie I catch you in, from this point on, I'm going to tie you and use this on your bare feet. If you think I'm kidding or bluffing you just go ahead and lie.”

She got it. She knew I wasn't kidding. I thought it would work, because the psychological buildup is often far worse than the torture itself. Jorge would have told me to go screw myself. Made me torture him. I figured she didn't have that kind of guts and I was right. She talked.

Jorge had been right about her. She was KGB, planted on Castro so the Kremlin would have an inside line on what the Beard was up to. She was dormant for long intervals, had a number of aliases and passports, and when she wasn't working she taught school in the Argentine. For many years she had been careful to stay away from Peru and her powerful and aristocratic family. They would commit her to an asylum if they ever caught her.

The rest of it was simple enough, if a little surprising. Cuban Intelligence had known about the installation on the crag for some time—but they hadn't known what it was, or for what it was intended. Their cadre in Peru was thin, poorly equipped and with no real support from the peasants, and barely managing to remain extant in the high Andes. Hunted and hungry most of the time. Castro was pinning his hopes, and spending his money, on the Bolivian guerrilla movement to the north. Peru could wait.

Then Che Guevara was killed, and the Bolivian thing collapsed. Havana sent El Rubio to replace him, with Jorge along to watch her in turn, and ordered her to move south into Peru. Then the TV broadcasts started, the whole thing erupted, and Havana sent orders to get to the installation on Condor Crag and destroy it if possible. Castro was pro-Mao Tse-tung. The Neo-Coms wanted Mao's head. Clear enough.

But Inez, El Rubio, was KGB. And the Kremlin wanted to protect and encourage the Neo-Coms—at least for the time being. Until they saw which way the cat jumped, or figured out a way to exploit the Neo-Com movement.

Inez had orders to protect the installation.

I took the stiletto out of the fire and touched it to a ration box. The wood scorched and smoked.

"You were in the field, Inez. In the mountains. How did you get your orders from KGB?"

"There is an agent in Caracas. I worked him that last night, just before I sabotaged the batteries."

You have to watch for details in interrogation. It is the little things that trip them up.

"How could you work Caracas? Jorge said you had no business around the radio—how did you get away with that?"

"Easy. With a little luck. Jorge and the others had been away foraging for supplies. Only Luis remained in camp and Luis wasn't too bright. He didn't know Morse. Inez worked Caracas and got her orders and shut Luis up by letting him have her. Luis was a moron. Luis believed that she loved only him and that the others must never suspect what they did together when they were alone."

Pretty dumb, Luis. Yet not so dumb that he hadn't told Jorge about

the matches.

I said: "So you hit the crag night before last? Jorge was suspicious of you, but he was sharing your bed and he liked it and he hadn't done anything about you yet. You must have been sweating, eh? How did you bring it off? How did you get them all zapped but Jorge?"

She stared at the smoking tip of the stiletto and took a deep breath.

"All right. I have a contact on the crag. Caracas told me about him. And I was desperate, as you say. Desperate and at my wit's end. So I got 'lost.' We went up just at dusk—there is an easy way up if you know it—and by the time we were on the plateau it was dark. I got separated from the others. I found my contact and warned him. He set up the ambush for the others. But because Jorge was suspicious of me, even more so after I came back, he stuck to me like a leech. So he didn't get killed by the laser guns."

I filled in the rest for her. "That contact you met gave you a cigarette or two. You smoked them and forgot about it. Then you came back and kissed him." I nodded toward the body.

She looked miserable and crestfallen, like a schoolgirl caught passing a naughty note.

"Yes. Such a stupid mistake. But we had been out of tobacco for days and I was dying for a smoke. I never thought—"

It is the stupid little mistakes that kill agents. I wondered when I would make mine and what it would be. Hawk says it will have something to do with booze and women. Somehow I doubt that.

I said, "This agent in Caracas—what is his name and his cover?" I could pass it on to Hawk for what it was worth.

She hadn't been expecting that question. She had been expecting another question, the big one, and wondering if she dared lie about it and chance the torture. I caught her off balance. She blurted out the Caracas man's name and I filed it away.

Then I really slipped it to her.

"The contact on the crag is Dion Hermes, right? He helicoptered in from Cuzco four days ago. By way of Lima. Before, that he worked out of Los Angeles. He's queer. He is also the top KGB man on the West Coast and he has been helping the Neo-Coms set up this TV deal because Moscow wants it that way. He arranged for the crag to be used as a retreat for the old lama, Li Tzu, and he brought Rona Matthews in on it. He writes the scripts and Matthews makes the tapes. He arranged the smuggling of the Chinese engineers into Peru. He milks the suckers that come here to sit at Li Tzu's feet, and he feeds the money into the Neo-Com kitty. The sex pills are the brainchildren of a Chicom scientist; just another part of the deal. Right so far?"

She was watching me with her mouth half-open. She was

impressed. And startled. Sometimes the enemy tends to underestimate AXE. We encourage that.

Inez tossed her cigarette into the fire. She smoothed her hair and shrugged. "You people are so damned clever! Why even bother to question me?"

"I want to know everything about Dion Hermes. Everything! I've come a long way to kill him."

I said: "Dion Hermes set me up for killing in Malibu. He didn't bring it off. I think he knows that. I think he told you about it. I also think that he gave you certain orders. Like maybe this—you were to stay down here in the valley and make contact with me when I showed up. Probably you were going to con me with the guerrilla bit, say you were working for Havana, and point out that our interests were identical for the time being. We both want to blow that TV installation. I might have fallen for it. More so if you could get me to crawl into your bedroll. Then you were going to lead me up the crag, by that easy way you just mentioned, and I was going to walk right into another ambush. Zap! Flowers for Nick Carter. That about right, Inez?"

I thought I read admiration in her eyes. And puzzlement. I thought I knew why she was puzzled. I knew a lot more about the setup than she did. I was head man in my operation. She was just a pawn, obeying orders, and they hadn't told her everything.

"You must be the devil's brother," she said at last. She crossed herself and I wondered at that. A very odd thing for her to do. A woman like her. Then I forgot it. My stupid little mistake.

We talked a good while longer. She told me the truth, as far as I could check, because she was afraid of the torture. What it boiled down to, and what I most cared about, was that Dion Hermes had to kill me to make himself welcome in Russia. That meant a face-to-face confrontation, and I liked that fine.

I learned one thing that surprised me in a way, yet in another way it didn't. Dion Hermes' assignment to kill me was long standing. Our involvement in the Malibu thing, in this whole Neo-Com setup, as a matter of fact, was very near to coincidental.

"They must be very careful how they kill you," Inez Graunt told me. "It must be done so that no possible suspicion attaches to them. There is detente now between Russia and the United States, and the Kremlin does not want this disturbed. You are an important man in AXE. They cannot just murder you the way they would an ordinary agent."

It sounded right I knew it was wrong. But I couldn't figure out where it was wrong. I had never even heard of Dion Hermes before this mission. Neither had Hawk. It just didn't figure that an important

agent, as important as Hermes now seemed to be—with the job of killing me—could stay under cover for so long.

I decided to test her. I picked up the stiletto and scorched the ration crate again. I stepped around the fire and she cringed back.

"You're lying," I said. "You're telling me some truth, but you're lying about something. What is it? And how in hell do you know so much about Dion Hermes and what he plans?"

She stared at the stiletto and her red mouth quivered. "I do not lie, Nick. I swear it. Hermes told me all these things—when I met him on the crag night before last."

I picked up a piece of the rope that had bound my ankles. "All right If you want it the hard way—"

She put her hand to her mouth and almost screamed. "I am not lying. He did tell me. I—I can prove it"

I waited. She stared at the stiletto and licked her lips. She was scared to death of that steel.

"Five seconds," I said. "Prove it"

The words gushed from her.

"You were in Beirut a few days ago. You were sleeping with a woman named Kezia Newmann. She is a double agent—she works both for KGB and for Shin Bet The Russians do not trust her and have been planning to kill her."

I suppose I looked a little foolish. I didn't drool, or let my jaw hang open, but I was hit pretty hard just the same.

She saw it and kept talking. "They were planning to kill you in that hotel in Beirut. The Phoenecia, I think?"

All I could do was nod.

"They had it worked out down to the last detail. Both you and the girl were to be poisoned, a bottle of arak, and a note was to be left indicating a double suicide. For love, and because you were both sick of the sordid work you did."

I thought I had her.

"And who was to write the note?"

"The woman. Kezia Newmann. She had already written it. They had it, ready to plant. Of course she did not know that she was to die, too. She was to say that she lost her courage at the last moment and vomited up the poison. You would be dead. The police would not hold her long. And she would have been well rewarded."

I went back around the fire and sat down. That had been a narrow one. I hoped that Hawk never found out about it.

"You left an hour too early," Inez said. "Just one hour too early. One of their men saw you leave. He was in a parking lot across the street from the hotel."

Nikolay Tovaretz. With the big hands. I had thought he was after

Kezia. He had been. And me. He had played it pretty cool when he saw me walking out of the trap.

Something still bothered me.

"Why would Hermes tell you all this? An agent he had never met before. That doesn't ring true."

She was turning sullen. "How much more do you want? I don't know why he told me so much. But he did. And he was very insistent that I listen to it, carefully, and not forget anything."

He had wanted me to know? It figured. He knew me well, then. Knew I would rise to the bait, that I wouldn't avoid a confrontation. How could Dion Hermes, a stranger, know me so well?

I lit a cigarette and tossed one to her. I looked at my watch. It was just midnight.

"All right," I said. "We'll go up the crag just before dawn. We can see a little, and it will be hard to see us."

She was scared again. "I don't want to go. Why must I? Can't you just let me disappear into the mountains? I can't hurt you or interfere in any way. I have no weapons and—"

"You go with me."

"But it is a trap. They'll be waiting to take you. And you know about it now and there will be a fight. I—I might—"

"Yes." I gave her a nasty grin. "You might get killed. That is possible. I might get killed. Another possibility. But we won't get killed in any trap. We're staying away from that easy path, away from that ledge and chimney. We're doing it the hard way—up the overhang on the east face." I had studied the charts of Condor Crag very carefully. It could be done. I knew that. They didn't know it, and they wouldn't be watching the east face. If we did it in half an hour, barely possible, we could be under cover before the sun rose.

Her amazement was genuine. "I'm a good climber. I was educated in Switzerland and before I put away childish things, bourgeois nonsense, I climbed a lot. I have done some of the most difficult peaks in the world. I say it can't be done."

"I say it can."

Chapter 9

It was a double overhang and it was a bitch. The weather was good enough, clear and cold with a steady, chill wind from the south. As it moaned in the crevices it sounded like a discordant organ tuning up. We were dressed for it, and warm enough, but I was going to have to take off my gloves to get up that first overhang. It would be fingers, knees, toes and face against the rock. One slip and that was it.

The hell of it was that we were roped together and I had to let her go first. I couldn't trust her under me.

When we were in position I waited until the last possible moment. With the first faint hint of dawn, when I could see my hand at arm's length, I said go.

She was frightened. I was nervous myself.

First we inched across a little upslanting glacier, very crevassed, that led into a couloir filled with jagged granite boulders. Now and again we heard rocks falling somewhere near. Not much of a nerve tonic.

She was good. Very good. At the very last I had second thoughts about bringing her along. I could have left her tied in the cave. I almost did. Then I remembered all the knots I had beaten and I decided against it, I only had one shot at this thing and I couldn't take any chances.

The final approach to the overhang was over a massive steep slab of granite that was coated with verglas. Thin ice that never melted all winter long. We were wearing the crampons and carried ice axes—another reason I didn't want her behind me—and I had all the other equipment. Pitons and a hammer, the rappel line and rope loops, and other odds and ends. Around my waist, in a plastic belt, I had the plastic explosive and the detonators and some very special silver batteries.

From the charts I knew the double overhang was shaped like a bowling pin standing on its head. Narrow at bottom, wide at top. Since it was impossible to climb, they thought, I doubted there would be any guards around. When we reached the peak, if we did, I planned to rappel down the far overhang to the plateau and take cover in the rocks. We would have to hide there all day. When it got dark I was going in and blow the installation —and kill Dion Hermes.

We worked our way around a jagged little aiguille and down again through another couloir that skirted a crevass falling away to nothing. What the Swiss call a bergschrund. There was a steady hollow thunder of falling rock from the bottom of it, stuff booming in from the far

side. Tons of it. I hoped it stayed over there.

Inez kept muttering that we were crazy. The dark gray was beginning to get milky now and I could see about a dozen feet. Just to our right was a big cornice, snow laden, and just ahead was the overhang. Brooding and waiting for us. Rock is inanimate matter, I know, but I had the feeling that this rock was sneering at me.

We stopped. She lay on her belly, panting. I lay on my back and studied the overhang. The first thing I saw cheered me. There was a ledge about fifteen feet below the rim. That last fifteen feet would be the life or death part because the lip of the plateau jutted out at least twenty degrees. I would do that last stretch myself, leaving her on the ledge. I had to. It was a choice I had to make and I chose the lesser evil. If I let her go first, and she made it, I could expect a crampon or an ice axe in the skull as I came up. I would go first and bet that she couldn't get down by herself. She was mountaineer enough to know that and I doubted she would cut herself loose and try. A gamble I had to take.

I got to my feet. "Let's go."

She got whiney. "I can't! I just can't do it. No one could." She was sorry now that she'd told me she was a climber.

I let her see the stiletto. "Look at it this way," I explained with patience. "I've got a job to do. I've come too far now to turn back. If you go up you have a chance—if you balk you have none. I'll have to kill you. There's no other way."

It was my no-kidding voice, and she knew it. She didn't doubt that I would kill her. She got ready to go.

I pointed out something else I had spotted. A barely visible wrinkle in the rock face, leading up and across from right to left. It ended about six feet below the ledge.

"Try that," I ordered. "You'll have to take off your gloves because it's only first-knuckle deep if it's that."

"But my hands will freeze." The wind did have an edge like well-tempered steel.

"Not if you do it fast," I said. "They'll get numb and hurt but they won't freeze. And we've got to do it fast. If we get caught in broad daylight on this rock face we'll be sitting ducks for those lasers. For anything. So get climbing and no more talk."

I watched her carefully, noting the holds she found and used. And once she was in it, knew she had to do it, she did okay. She was within ten feet of the ledge when she suddenly stopped. I figured she had another five or six feet before the fissure petered out, but she said no.

"There's a chunk of rock sticking out from the face," she called down. "It's not very big, but I can't get around it. What shall I do?"

She sounded calm enough. I figured she knew what she was talking about. I called back. "You're sure?"

"I'm sure. The rock is iced. Smooth. It can't be done."

It had to be done.

"Hold on," I called. "Put a piton in and a loop and stay right, there. I'm coming up."

I had to go over her.

The wrinkle was a trifle deeper than I thought. Most of the way I could get my fingers in to the second knuckle. There were crampon holds, if you could find them, and quite a few vertical slots where you could wedge a knee. That's the way it is with a lot of cliffs—everybody says they're impossible and you never really know until you try.

When I got to her, though, I saw that she was right to be leery. It was a rough one. The boulder, shaped like an outsize watermelon, was in exactly the wrong place. It jutted out from the cliff face, squarely across the wrinkle she had been following, and you couldn't reach around it to get a hold on the far side. It was smooth and coated with verglas. It wasn't big but it sure was a bastard.

I had been taking up slack in the rope as I climbed toward her. I stopped six feet behind her and tautened up and checked the knot I had put around her waist. My own special knot.

She had put in a piton and a loop and was hanging with one arm through it. It was a hundred feet down.

As I studied the face directly over her I said, "How are your feet?"

"I have a toe hold. As long as I don't move."

"Then don't. I'll have to go over you and pick up the crack on the other side. Then I'll get you around and we'll go on to the ledge."

"Can't we untie? If you go you'll take me with you."

I took a chance. She was immobilized; I didn't see how she could go back, and there was no point in killing her out of spite. If I fell, she would still have a chance. I thought it over, fast, and couldn't see any way she could hurt the mission, or AXE, or the United States. Not directly. If I got killed the mission was over anyway, until Hawk could set it up again.

"I'm giving you a break," I told her. "Don't try to take advantage of it."

She sneered. "What could I possibly do? I'm frozen here. I don't think I can hang on much longer. My hands are going. Hurry!"

I couldn't hurry much. I had to find places to drive in pitons, make loops, then inch myself up. I started with a triangle, two pitons for my feet, one high over me to reach for. The only reason I could do it at all was that the face leveled vertically here and was merely sheer and not overhung.

I began to echelon the pitons to the left, over her, stair-stepping them. I made it, cleared the jutting boulder and started working down. Now I had a real problem. I can't drive pitons with my feet.

Working with my left hand, with my nose against the face, I put in the last piton and looped it. My fingers were going numb and I almost dropped the hammer. When I had the piton in as solid as I could get it I took a deep breath and told myself that this was it and not to be chicken.

I would have to trust that piton, put all my weight on it, let myself down on the far side of the boulder and hope that I could pick up the wrinkle again with my feet. I weigh well over two hundred and I was going to dangle in mid-air with all the stress on my hand and wrist. The wrinkle was maybe two inches deep and an inch wide. I couldn't see much under me and would have to do it by feel. I didn't know how solid, or rotten, the rock was where I had driven the piton. You can't always tell by feeling.

I remembered how she had crossed herself. "If you still know how to pray," I told her, "you might try it now. I can't. Maybe you can. Because if I go, you're finished too."

I let myself down and put my full weight on the piton and loop. The piton squeaked and moved—and held. I swayed there and the wind keened around me and I scraped my toes against the cliff trying to find the wrinkle.

I couldn't find it. My toes kept sliding around, scraping rock that was slick as glass. The piton moved and squeaked over me. I had a firm grip on the loop but by now my hand was so numb that I couldn't feel the texture of the rope.

I still couldn't find the wrinkle. I started to weigh a couple of tons. My shoulder ached, the tendons throbbing.

I was gasping in the thin cold air. "Can you see anything? Where are my feet now?"

She was good and scared. She didn't think I was going to make it.

"I can't see. I don't dare lean out far enough!"

"You had better dare! I'm about done." The voice didn't sound like mine.

I could hear her moving. And muttering. I wondered if she was praying.

She said: "You're too low! Bring your foot up—your right foot! There. Now to the left—no, no, to the right now. Down a little—down —"

I had it. I wedged the toe of my boot as far into, the wrinkle as the crampon permitted and took the weight off my wrist. Whew!

After that it was, as the English say, a piece of cake. The wrinkle widened and deepened on the far side of the boulder. She tossed me

the rope and after I put in a few more pitons I eased her out and around the boulder with a short rappel.

When we got to the ledge under the worst of the overhang we got a break. You couldn't see it from the bottom, but there was a half-fine set into the cliff here and the overhang was nothing near so tough as it looked from below. I went up and pulled her after me.

High time, too. Dawn was pearling into broad day and a hint of red pennons flaunted along the Cordillera to the east, staining snow-covered fangs that slashed at the sky. The black dots planing around one of the peaks had to be eagles or condors.

I took one look at the little plateau and decided against rappelling down until after dark. This was perfect. About an acre of scree and boulders, with here and there a sparse patch of winter-killed ichu grass. The real beauty of it was that the plateau was cup-shaped and lined at the rim with boulders to make a natural fortress. We were high over the lower plateau where stood the palace and temple complex of the old Incas. Nothing could see us but the eagles.

I found a spot in among the huge rocks, out of the wind, and got the rope off Inez Graunt. She was shivering and too cold to talk. We chafed our hands together to get the circulation back and after a few minutes she smiled and gave me a sly look and a squeeze. My answer was a stare that was as cold as the rocks we were sitting on. She turned off the smile, turned on the sulks and took her hands out of mine.

She huddled in the llamaskin coat, the hood almost hiding her face, and asked: "What now?"

"We wait. This is perfect vantage. I'll have everything mapped out before we go down tonight. I'll need a lot of information from you, and don't bother to lie—I can still kill you. And will if I have to."

"You wouldn't dare risk a shot now."

"You're right." I snapped the stiletto into my hand and let her see it briefly. "Don't make me use it, Inez."

"I won't. I keep telling you that. I'm beaten. All I want now is to get out of this alive. And I think you owe me something—"

"I don't owe you anything, not a damned thing. But if you play along and don't try to cross me, I'll see what I can do for you with my boss. That's all I can promise."

Maybe Hawk could use her. A double agent always comes in handy. In her case, though, it would be a triple agent. She was already doubling.

We got settled in for the day. I had some cigarettes and a few bars of chocolate.

I found a good peephole in the rocks and began to search the plateau below with my binoculars. The lens were colored and

wouldn't reflect light. I trained the glasses on a rambling scatter of white granite buildings half a mile distant. Condor Crag. Where the last of the Incas had ruled—and died. Four hundred years ago. Victims of Spanish progress.

The terrain below me wasn't too bad. Of course I had to go over it in the dark. Starting from the base of our pinnacle, the mesa ran fairly level for about two hundred yards. It ended against a wall of white granite ashlar. A dry wall, held together all this time by tension and friction, and worked with only stone and bronze tools. It extended clear across the mesa, from rim to rim of the crag, and was about six feet high and without embrasures. The Incas hadn't reckoned on any attack from this direction.

Beyond the wall a dry moat sloped away to the first of the granite outbuildings. As it neared the buildings the moat leveled out and I spotted the helicopter pad. There was no 'copter now and no building close enough to shelter one. So they didn't linger. They flew in from Cuzco, did their business and flew out again.

That helicopter bothered me a little. If it happened to swoop in over our little nest it just might spot us.

I forgot the helicopter. Inez tapped my arm and said, "Look. Over there. That first building—that must be the TV transmitter."

The building was low and squat and fiat-topped. The thing was coming up out of a square dark hole in the roof. It glinted in the first rays of the sun. Stainless steel. A stainless-steel needle with a bulb-shaped point on it, like the onion domes you see on Russian churches.

"Antenna," I muttered. "Not transmitter. That will be in the building. Or below it. Good. Very good. It's close enough."

The antenna kept on shoving up into the sky. It was like a flagpole except for the bulb on the end, and after the bulge it tapered down to about a foot thick at the base. It shoved into the sky for a hundred feet or so and stopped.

She put her cold mouth against my ear. "Are they transmitting now?"

"How the hell do I know! Probably. I doubt they're running it up for the fun of it"

They were transmitting. Bouncing a laser signal off one of our satellites, or one of the Russky's, and drowning out everything else. Flooding the world with Neo-Com propaganda. I wondered if Hawk was watching in Lima.

So I knew where the transmitter was. Like shooting fish in a barrel. Still no sign of Dion Hermes. Or anyone else. Nothing moved around the buildings. Forlorn. Desolate. Not even any smoke. It would be heated by electricity from big generators flown in long ago, when Li Tzu first set up shop.

Then something did move. I spotted it through the glasses and got them into new focus. A thin line of movement, men and women, filing through one of the ancient palace gates and winding slowly toward the wall. They dipped into the moat and kept on toward the wall.

"It's a funeral procession," the woman said beside me. "In the old tradition. My God! They're putting the body out for the condors."

I had the lead man squarely in the glasses now. It was Li Tzu, well bundled against the cold. He plodded along with downcast eyes, plucking with bony fingers at a miniature sitar. The wind carried the sound away from us.

I wasn't interested in the music. Dion Hermes was walking behind Li Tzu. Playing a flute. Just as I had first seen him in the beach house at Malibu. He was wearing a fur cap with ear flaps and a heavy alpaca coat. I looked him over thoroughly, decided that the slight bulge under the alpaca coat must be a shoulder clip. Hermes wasn't taking any chances, even in a funeral procession.

Inez Graunt had been watching me. In a funny voice she said: "You do frighten me, you know. When you grin like that, you look like a wolf."

"The better to gnaw on you. Shut up and don't distract me." I had carefully removed from the spot any rock she could lift, and at the moment was in no danger of being brained from behind.

The corpse was naked. An old woman carried on an ordinary hospital stretcher. As I studied the ravaged face—they had taken out her teeth—I knew I had seen the face before, and I knew where. In Malibu. I didn't know her name, but she was one of Li Tzu's devotees. I remembered what Hawk had said about the making of wills. This poor old gal was going to her reward. Now Li Tzu—and the Neo-Coms—would get theirs. They would if I had anything to say about it.

It wasn't much as rewards go. The procession wound across the mesa, turned left away from us, and halted at a high stone altar that stood near the rim. I hadn't seen it before.

They didn't waste much time with the poor old woman. Two of them lifted the stretcher and slid the body off on the stone. It looked like it had been used recently, because I could see bones and a skull with flesh still clinging to it. My stomach is pretty strong, but I had a queasy feeling now.

Li Tzu stopped plunking his little sitar and raised his hands. Dion Hermes hushed his flute. The rest of them stood around with bowed heads—I had them all pegged now as the last cargo of devotees flown in—and stared at the ground as Li Tzu intoned something.

Not Hermes. He kept glancing around, restless and nervous, searching the sky. Watching for the helicopter, I thought. Once he stared directly at the spot where I lay and I had the glasses square on

that handsome, pansy face. He looked cold and cross and worried. Why? As far as he knew he had everything under control.

Yet not quite everything. I could put myself in his place and understand his unease. I hadn't died in the fire, and he was well blown in the States. He thought I was coming after him, but he couldn't be absolutely sure, and unless he could kill me, and prove it to the Kremlin, he didn't have any home to run to. He had baited a trap, yes, but it was tenuous and he had lost Inez Graunt. That he didn't know yet, but he would. Meantime he kept staring around over the windswept barrenness, and he looked like a man afraid.

The old lama finished speaking. He made a few passes over the corpse and the procession started back for the wall. The naked old woman lay on the altar and I didn't look at her again. She had been very old and in death her raddled flesh was somehow obscene. She would have been a pretty young girl, I thought, who could never have dreamed of such an end.

"The Incas brought their dying people here," Inez said. "The very old and sick. The important people, of course. Wealthy. During their last days they were drugged and given anything they wanted to make them happy. Sexual entertainment, anything. I think in the end they were painlessly killed—the Inca version of euthanasia."

Of course. Euthanasia. And sex before dying. One last beautiful fling. That was what Li Tzu was selling. Not life. He was selling death. Death with all the trimmings.

There was a rustle of huge wings as the shadow drifted across the rocks near us. Then another one planed down. Condors. Carrion eaters.

One of them came in very near us. The beak was hooked and cruel; the scrawny neck was naked and vile. As it drifted over us, very close, it gave us a malevolent stare with hooded yellow eyes. Not interested. We weren't dead yet.

I watched the condors tear into the old lady's corpse. Soon there were a dozen of them gorging themselves, fighting and scrabbling and ripping the carcass to shreds.

I was glad when the helicopter came blatting in, swinging down from the east and silhouetted against Mt. Salcantay fifty miles away. It was low when it swung over the rim and neither the pilot nor the single passenger had a chance to spot us on the pinnacle.

The helicopter hovered over the pads and then let down in a flurry of dust. The passenger got out and the pilot handed him a bag and a briefcase. Then the pilot joined him and they began walking toward the nearest building. I had the glasses glued on the passenger. There was something familiar about the walk, about the big fat rear on him. I've had a lot of practice and I'm good at recognition.

The passenger was disguised. He had a beard and it didn't look right. Phony, even at that distance, to an eye like mine.

He was wearing dark glasses. They were getting near the building now and I was going to lose him. Who was he? Where had I seen him? I knew the walk and that chubby ass and still I couldn't place him. He was a big man.

The wind did it for me. It swirled over the mesa in a sudden gust of fury and blew the guy's hat off. The pilot laughed and ran after it. I saw a fringe of red hair around a balding head, and when he half-turned to follow the hat I saw the gut on him.

Bill Phelan! Old CIA Phelan himself. The last time I had seen him we had been snapping at each other with Hawk acting as referee.

Chapter 10

I waited until well after dark before moving off the pinnacle. We were both starving but there was no help for that. Inez Graunt slept a lot. I could have used some sleep, too, but there wasn't a chance. I thought a lot about Bill Phelan.

The CIA was sticking their nose in. Hawk was head man in this affair and I couldn't see the old man standing by and letting the CIA louse up the operation. Then I remembered the way Hawk had been acting and I wasn't so sure. That very hush-hush call from the CIA Director to Hawk in Lima—when I had accidentally answered the phone—and a lot of other little things. But not enough things. I was missing a few pieces of the puzzle and I was stuck. Nothing made any real sense.

The weather turned bad again as we rappelled down the pinnacle. The wind shifted to the west and blew harder, and there was more rain on the way. I rappelled down first and waited for Inez. No sweat there. There was no place for her to run.

When we were down on the dark, wind-blown plain I cut a short length of the rappel line and made a leash for her. I looped it around her waist and tied a knot that only I can untie.

She was pretty cool and calm now and had stopped complaining. I wondered about that but I didn't say anything. She touched my cheek with her hand as I tied the knot.

"Just like a dog, eh? You're not even giving me a chance to run if things go wrong. Suppose we run into a laser patrol—I'll be zapped right along with you."

I said: "If I do it right, things won't go wrong. We might run into a laser patrol, sure, but at least it won't be an ambush. You haven't had a chance to talk to Dion Hermes and set one up. If we do meet a patrol it will be by accident and our chances will be as good as theirs."

I gagged her and tied her hands behind her. It was all I could do. She had to walk and she might kick a stone to make noise, but somehow I didn't think so. She was pretty frustrated and defeated, and all she wanted was to live.

There was no moon but still a few stars winking huge and bright in the east, not yet covered by the cloud scud. We got to the white ashlar wall and followed it until I found the gate the funeral procession had used that morning. I went first, tugging her along behind me. I tied my end of the line into my belt. I had the Luger in my right hand and the stiletto in my left

We were in the flat part of the old moat now, skirting the

helicopter pad to our left. The chopper had left an hour or so after Phelan's arrival and hadn't come back.

So far no trouble. Beyond the transmitter building, in the rambling mass of the Inca palace-temple, a great many lights were showing. I could hear music. The same music they had been playing in the beach house at Malibu. I eased up to the small building and around a corner and stood a moment watching the greater mass of buildings some four hundred yards to the south. I had spent hours studying it through the binoculars that afternoon.

The lighted windows were soft gold holes in the night. Dark figures kept passing to and from one room to another. I imagined they must be pretty comfortable in there. Li Tzu would have spent a lot of dough to make a lot of dough—which the Neo-Coms were taking from him.

I heard him coming around the far corner of the building. I pushed the woman quietly back against the wall and stood in front of her. I whispered, "No sound."

This was a test. All she had to do was scuff her feet and warn the guard.

She didn't. He walked around the corner and right into the stiletto. I had to kill him. I had to kill everyone that got in the way. I had no time for mercy or prisoners.

I put the stiletto deep in his heart and moved behind him as he reeled. I choked off his death sounds and eased him to the ground and took out the stiletto and wiped it on his jacket. She made some kind of a sound behind the gag. I listened. Nothing but the wind.

I waited five minutes. I stood close to her. She was trembling again now, and losing her nerve, and I listened. Still nothing.

I took a chance and used my pen flash for a second or two. He was young, in his twenties, and definitely Chinese, but dressed and with a hair arrangement that made him look Indian under a casual scrutiny. The Mongol strain was there, way back, and the Neo-Coms were using it to mask their people.

I picked up the small laser gun he had been carrying and felt it over in the dark. It had a rifle stock with a pistol grip that was knurled, and the barrel was thick and smooth and a good three inches in diameter. The business end had a cone on it. Under the gun, set in front of the trigger assembly, was a battery instead of a magazine or clip.

I knew just enough about lasers to know that I didn't know anything about them. I'd been to school and I studied both lasers and masers, but operating one in the field is another matter. There are a lot of different lasers, and they operate differently.

I smashed the barrel of the laser with the butt of my Luger, as quietly as I could. By the sound it was made of either glass or plastic.

I moved around the corner, pulling the girl after me. Then another corner without meeting anyone. From here I could see the entrance to the building. A low-wattage bulb glimmered over the door, and I saw a foyer and stairs going down. A series of thick cables, fixed to the wall by brackets, ran from the stairs out the door and around a corner of the building where they left the brackets and drooped to the ground. They led to the studios in the main complex, where Rona Matthews' tapes were played and the cameras moved in and out on the devil mask.

Rona Matthews hadn't been in that funeral procession.

I made the girl lie on her belly—it's hell to get up with your hands tied behind you—and got the llamaskin coat loose so I could get at the explosive and the detonators. I heard an occasional sound of voices over the humming generators, but nobody came up the stairs. I worked fast.

I had a lot of explosives and could afford to waste some in decoys. I plastered some around the worn cornerstones and stuck a detonator in it, in plain sight, then ran back half the length of the wall and dug a hole with the stiletto in under a base stone. I put the real charge in there and filled in the hole with the detonator barely peeking out. I was going to detonate it by remote control, and though the rays from my charging disc were supposed to penetrate wood and dirt and stone, even rubber and plastic insulation. I wasn't taking any chances. When I pressed the button I wanted that charge to go!

The Incas built their houses, and temples and palaces, without mortar. Dry. Every wall, and every arch, had to be fitted around a central key stone. Dislodge it and the whole thing went. Like one domino knocking over the others. I figured I had enough explosive under that one wall to blow the key stones in all the other walls, and send the whole thing down on the transmitter below. Tons and tons of white granite. I went back to the girl.

I was just in time. I make mistakes the same as anyone else and this time I had made a beaut.

She was rolling toward the lighted entrance. Just as I had rolled down those stairs in Malibu. She was maybe six feet from the entrance, rolling and scuffling and straining and grunting through the gag. I went after her.

I grabbed her feet and dragged her back into the shadow, keeping an eye on the stairs. Nothing. It had been a narrow thing.

I stood her up against the wall of the building and lifted her chin gently with my left fist. She stared at me defiantly over the gag.

"What is down there?" I asked. I was gentle. "Or rather who is down there that would make you take a chance like that? I told you I would kill you if you tried any monkey business."

She kept staring at me and shaking her head. I gave her a little rap with my fist. "Who's down there? Dion Hermes? Waiting for me?"

She nodded yes.

I didn't believe her. There was something very wrong about all this, all of a sudden. One guard. Just one guard.

And those voices from below the stairs. My subconscious had been working on that and now I knew what it had been trying to tell me. The voices were repeating themselves, saying the same things over and over again. I had just now caught it. It was a tape, rigged to backwind and then replay. The sound of laughter and mild curses, of commands and arguments and joking. The sound of unsuspecting men. Men off guard. A sound to lure me down there.

I began to get it then.

I poked her again, lightly.

"This is all a setup, isn't it? They want me to blow the transmitter. They even sacrificed one man to make it look good. You were supposed to lead me down those stairs."

She stared at me.

"You and Hermes rigged it this way," I said. "Because you thought Jorge was going to be killed in that ambush with the others. Leaving only you. Then you would meet me and use your sex on me, and even if that didn't work you could still try to convince me that you were Castro's girl and wanted to blow the transmitter as much as I did. We could work together this time. But Jorge was suspicious and stuck to you and wasn't killed. And he was too tough and too smart for you to kill afterward. You got desperate and had to use me, depend on me killing him for you, so everything could go on as planned.

"There was going to be an ambush," I went on, "but it wasn't to be on the easy climb up the crag. That would encourage me and I might get a little careless and that would make it easier. And when I went down there—" I nodded toward the lighted entrance—"to blow the transmitter, because I am a good workman and wouldn't depend on the falling stone to do the job, then Hermes would be there waiting for me. That about right, Inez?"

She nodded. I took the gag out of her mouth. Yelling couldn't hurt me now. If Dion Hermes was down there he was down there and I had to go after him. Down those stairs.

She knew that and now all the play-acting was over. This was the real Inez. Diehard Commy, Russian Style. And not afraid to die.

"That's right," she spat at me. "Hermes is down there now—waiting with a laser gun. The only way down is those stairs. If you haven't got the nerve, he'll just wait until daylight and then hunt you down. He has a few men left."

I put the stiletto through her coat so that the point was pricking

her breast. "Why do you want me to blow the transmitter? You and Hermes? I thought the Russians were trying to protect it."

Her smile was nasty, just visible in the faint light from the entrance. I was sheltered by the projecting corner and I wasn't worried about Hermes coming up. He would wait for me to come down.

I wondered what Bill Phelan was doing. How he fitted into this. I didn't care, so long as he didn't interfere and cheat me of Hermes.

"Change of plans," Inez sneered. "News is slow coming out of China, but sometimes we get it before you do. Naturally, as our organization is better. The Chinese General the Neo-Coms have been counting on has been uncovered and shot by Mao. A one-hour trial. The rest of the Neo-Coms, those in China, are on the run. Those who were here are quietly melting into the countryside. It's all over."

I could see how it was. The Kremlin doesn't have much use for losers. There was no profit in supporting the Neo-Coms now. The ship was sinking and the rats were deserting.

She gave me a superior look. "Anyway, you'll be dead. Who is going to know who blew up the transmitter? Maybe we can take credit for it and get a kind word from China for a change. Maybe I can take credit for it and overcome those suspicions in Havana. It isn't impossible."

"It is for you," I told her. "Because if I'm dead you are going to be dead too. I promise you that" •

We were quiet for a moment. She leaned against the wall and watched me, moving her hands behind her to ease the strain of the line on her wrists. The wind keened around and through the centuries-old ashlar stones. The light beckoned over the dark stairwell.

Dion Hermes was down there. What was I waiting for?

I clipped her on the chin with a short right hand. She fell toward me and I reversed her and slung her over my shoulder so her feet dangled behind me. She wasn't much of a laser shield but she would have to do.

I held her with my left arm around her knees so that most of her torso was in front of me. I had the detonation disc in my left hand, my finger on the button that would activate the "tie-pin" detonators in the plastic. If I died in laser flame my reflex agony would be enough to press the button.

The Luger was ready in my right hand. I crossed the lighted area and went into the foyer and started down the stairs.

There were twenty steps. Newly installed and on the near-vertical. Another weak bulb gleamed at the bottom. The cables writhed down the wall beside me. When they reached bottom they ran on the floor, off into the semi-gloom.

I followed the cables with my feet. The humming of the generators was louder. It got darker, then lighter, and I came to a new concrete projection jutting into the corridor. A grenade baffle. Beyond it the corridor would jog and make a sharp turn. Forethought there.

Inez moved and sighed, groaned a little. Her head knocked against my knees every step I took. I eased around the baffle, careful to keep her body in front of mine.

I oozed around the jog in the corridor. It ran straight ahead of me and into the transmitter room. It was well lighted. A bank of generators hummed along one wall and along another were the consoles and open grids of the transmitter. There was a large desk in the center of the room, and several chairs around, and on a work bench near the generators was the tape machine chattering away. As I watched, it fell silent and began to rewind itself. Minor-league cleverness that had fooled me for a time.

Dion Hermes wouldn't show himself first, I had to bait him out of his cover. That meant giving him first shot.

It took me ten seconds to spot his hiding place. The corridor ran straight on and through the transmitter room and appeared to end in a blank concrete wall. It didn't. There was another grenade baffle there, where the wall split, set so cunningly that at first glance the wall looked solid. If your depth perception was a little off you'd never spot it.

He was behind that baffle. Behind him would be another exit, probably leading into a tunnel running up to the palace-temple complex. It figured.

The baffle was solid concrete and he couldn't zap me from a loophole. He had to show himself.

Inez Graunt groaned. I stepped into the transmitter room and stared at the baffle.

"All fight, Hermes. Let's get it over with."

The tone-shaped end of the laser gun peeked around the baffle. I thought it shook it a little and I wondered if his guts were really up to this. Yet he had been gutty enough back at Malibu.

His voice gave him away. He was running scared. But the beautiful diction was still there.

"Do you imagine, Mr. Carter, that you can save yourself by using Miss Graunt as a shield? How really stupid of you! I am quite prepared to kill her as well as yourself, if it should prove necessary."

"It's going to be necessary," I told him. I laughed, just to get on his nerves, and let him see the Luger's mean dark eye. "Screw your courage to the sticking point, fancy boy, and come out from behind your concrete. We'll each get in a shot. Who knows? Russian roulette is a funny game."

Now he sounded more petulant than afraid. "You are a most amazing man, Mr. Carter. A character indeed. You defy description. You . are a rara avis, and it is a pity to kill you. One might almost call it a sacrilege, because I am sure there will never be another like you."

The old talking con. Any second now.

"But that," he went on, "is of course the very point, isn't it. You are so extraordinary and dangerous that you must be killed at all cost. I ___"

The interrupted sentence bit. He stepped around the baffle and leveled the laser gun at me.

I was one-tenth of a second ahead of him. I dropped the girl and leaped down the corridor between the desk and tool bench. Three steps. I stopped. I didn't fire.

He did. The laser gun lanced a pencil thin beam at me. It struck me squarely in the chest.

Chapter 11

I threw the dice and I won. Most lasers will destroy only at the point of focus. I knew that much. If Hermes did, he forgot it.

My body deflected the beam without harm to me. I ducked, roiled and came up prone with the Luger in both hands. He kept zapping. Hermes was all shook up and in trying to follow me he depressed the cone of the laser and the beam hit Inez Graunt. Three steps back of where I had been. Right at the focusing point.

Her body burst into flame. Her hair crackled and charred and was gone. She was a bald skeleton with fire where flesh had been. I snapped a shot at him and missed. Missed. I never miss at that range. This time I missed. I saw the concrete splinters fly as my bullet hit the baffle. It was a head-shot and tough, but I should have gotten him.

The laser was zapped out now. So was Dion Hermes. He dropped the laser gun and took off. I went after him. As I darted around the baffle I could smell Inez Graunt still burning. She had no buddy, no Jorje, to muffle the flames and try to keep her alive.

Beyond the baffle, as I had suspected, the corridor changed to a ramp sloping down into a tunnel. Hermes was rounding a bend fifty yards ahead of me. He vanished before I could snap a shot at him."

I had to keep him in view. When I rounded the next bend in the tunnel I had gained ten yards on him.

The lights in the tunnel ceiling went out. Behind me, somewhere back toward the transmitter room, there was a slow purring and then a clang as a door came down. No exit there.

For a minute I stood in the stygian gloom and thought it over. I began to weave a tentative pattern that would fit the facts. And, working by touch in the pitch dark, I planted a strip of plastic explosive at the base of the tunnel wall and left a detonator in it.

I waited, because now I thought I had it mostly figured. There should be a light soon. Meantime I felt my way down the tunnel and planted another patch of explosive. The tunnel began to slant up and I knew that I was approaching the Inca palace and temples.

A light winked on at the far end of the tunnel. Calling to me. Come and see what's here.

I headed for the light, just as I was supposed to. Somewhere in the maze of the old temples and palaces there was a console and somebody was sitting before it. Pressing buttons and watching my progress on a scanner. Radar. I was a blip moving along the tunnels. The lights-off bit was just to spook me.

Another ceiling door clanged down behind me. The light ahead

glowed a welcome. I was being herded along, but he was very courteous about it. As the inevitability of the confrontation grew on me I discounted Dion Hermes. I was still going to kill him, but in the darkness a lot of stray pieces began to fall into place. Dion Hermes had tried to kill me twice and had goofed it both times. I didn't think he'd get another chance. But he still had to pay for what he had done to Pat Kilbride.

I stopped a dozen paces away from the light and studied it. It came from a square opening set into the tunnel wall, covered with a steel mesh. I heard voices from beyond the opening, and the acridity of incense wafted into the tunnel. I slipped toward the meshed window and peered into the light beyond.

It was all part of the mumbo-jumbo to confuse and unnerve me. Or was it? By now I wasn't so sure. I had a feeling—maybe the guy at the console, leading me through the maze, was stalling a bit. Hesitant. Wanting a little more time before making a final and irrevocable decision. It was tenuous, but the thought stuck with me. This was not going to be just another High Noon type face-off and shoot-out. There was something very different about this—something odd and disturbing and very human.

“In the beginning there was the Way. The Road. The Way is immutable and has always and will always be there. We find it only through suffering. But to suffer is not enough, for what is the point in suffering if there is not joy and pleasure to be found beyond our suffering? And does not this joy and pleasure, once we find it, make us happy and let us approach Death without fear? It does. It should.”

The words came calm and clear over the soft plinging of a sitar. Through the mesh I saw Li Tzu seated on a low dais, squatting before the big sitar I had seen in Malibu. As he spoke, he plucked at the strings with his little monkey fingers. No sign of Dion Hermes. No flute music. Just a big Magnovox playing softly in the background, near a tall idol that was spewing incense about.

I counted nine of the devotees. Twelve had been on the Braniff charter to Lima.

The nine were not looking at Li Tza. They were grouped about a central dais, higher and larger than the one on which the old lama sat. All nine of them were dressed in yellow robes and held big yellow scarves which they kept pressing to their faces, as though inhaling something concealed in the scarves or impregnated in the cloth. Hawk had made a guess about that—passing on what his experts told him—and it looked as if he was right.

There was a bier on the high dais. On the bier lay Rona Matthews. She was dressed in the Sacsahuaman costume, the Green Goddess of fertility. The same ornate headdress she had worn in Malibu. The

mask, with its hooked nose and staring eyes, lay on a pillow beside her. Her eyes were closed and her hands crossed over her chest.

This one I figured for a natural death: Maybe the altitude. Maybe I was. wrong. Anyway the little scene below me proved one thing I had suspected—Li Tzu and his novices didn't know what the hell was going on. Maybe Li Tzu, a little. The others—nothing. They were all old and sick and only interested in finding a little joy and pleasure after all their suffering. Before the condors got them. They could afford it, and Li Tzu was showing them the Way. And maybe it wasn't such a bad bargain at that.

The aphrodisiac was in the yellow scarves. Probably a combination of aphrodisiac and one of the powerful hallucinatory drugs. They triggered sexual response, even in the old and sick, by using animal gland secretions. He wouldn't have told the old folks where those scarves had been before he passed them out.

The lights went out in the chamber below me. I was half-expecting it. He had let me see the show while he thought matters out. Now a decision was made and we could get on with it.

To my left, far down the tunnel, another light was beckoning. I started toward it, leaving the wailing and the questioning behind me. As I watched I had molded plastic explosive to the wall, but I left without putting a detonator in it. Give the old people a chance. An hour, Li Tzu had said, and in an hour I would be dead and out of it. Or alive and in command.

Before I reached the light I rolled some of the plastic into a ball, rammed home a detonator, and dropped it softly behind me as I walked. When she blew she was going to blow good.

The light dangled from a massive stone lintel. Ancient stone, chisel-worked, and beyond would be one of the Inca temples. In the light I could make out time-eroded stick figures and several sunbursts.

There, was a light beyond the light. An electric candle glowing on a great slab of black granite. An altar. On the altar, with something long and black sticking out of his chest, was Dion Hermes. His eyes were open, staring up at the light he could not see, and his arms dangled over the edge of the altar.

I stepped inside the vast tomblike room. I had the Luger in my right hand and the detonator disc in my left. My finger was on the button. I held the disc up so he could see it plainly.

I said: "See it, Phelan? You know what it is. I won't die before I can press the button—and when I do the whole place goes."

No answer. He was thinking. He was doing a lot of thinking these last few hours. Bad. Puts you at a disadvantage—sicklied o'er by the pale cast of thought.

There was a smaller altar over close to one wall. It was low and

blocky and he was lying behind it with the rifle leveled at my guts. I started toward the big altar where the body of Hermes lay. The thing in his chest was a curved obsidian knife. Phelan had been playing High Priest.

"Stop right there," he said. "I don't want to kill you yet. And it won't do you any good to take cover. I can wait you out. Or I can leave through a trap in the floor behind me and seal it and leave you here to die. Or I could call for help, I still have a few men left, and I could let them kill you. So you see I still have a few options."

I nodded. I could see the rifle across the altar, and a dim outline behind it. I didn't want to risk a shot with the Luger. It was a bad target, in terrible light, and if I missed he would have to kill me. Somehow I got the idea that he hadn't yet made up his mind about that.

"So Inez was conning me all along," I said. "Good job, too. She was a good actress even if she didn't have to be. She was mostly telling the truth—except that she substituted Hermes' name for yours. And I led her into that myself because I was so damned stupid that I couldn't see anything but Hermes."

He didn't say anything. The rifle barrel clinked on the granite as he moved it.

I pointed to the body of Dion Hermes. "Why did you kill him? I don't like that I wanted him especially for myself."

He sounded tired. Mortally tired. "What difference does it make? He was a good agent, but he bungled the thing with you. I couldn't take him to Russia With me, even if I decide to go. They don't like his sort."

I didn't try anything. Nothing stupid. I tried to remember just where I had planted the explosive and to calculate just how much of this old temple was going to go when I pressed the button. I figured I would have to press it. It was just a matter of timing.

Still I had to give him a chance. That is what it says in the book.

I tried. "Why don't you toss the rifle away, Phelan, and come out with your hands up. I've got nothing personal about you and I won't hurt you. That's a promise, Phelan, and I never break my word."

I flicked the Luger at the body on the altar. "I was going to kill him, with pleasure. You I'll take back to the States to stand trial. How about it?"

It was the simple and easy way to do it. If I knew Hawk he would be in Cuzco now, waiting for me to get in touch. He could have an AXE 'copter in here within an hour.

Phelan's laugh was tortured. Strangled. He couldn't stop once he started. He went on and on, gasping for breath.

"You can't be that much of a fool, Carter! Or hasn't. Hawk told

you? They don't want me back in the States. That is the last thing they want. The CIA wants me killed in some place just like this. Desolate and out of the way. My body will never be found. And there won't be any scandal or any uproar in the newspapers. CIA has got to protect their image, man. How would it look to admit that somebody like me, high up with a big job, could stay under cover for ten years! If they can kill me quietly down here, they will never have to admit it."

I stared at the body of Hermes. A lot of things were going click-click into place. I'd had the hunch, had suspected, but I hadn't known for sure. Now I did.

Phelan managed to stop laughing. "It was Hawk that blew me. CIA never did. It must have been something when Hawk told the Director about me. And started putting on the pressure."

It sure must have been. Hawk had planned the whole thing. I knew about the files he kept, and the file he used for a brain. He kept a sharp eye on the other services for anything he could use in dealing with them, and some people might think he skirted close to blackmail. It wasn't, really. It was just that Hawk had this fierce dedication thing about AXE.

I saw now how he had managed to get AXE into the top spot on the Neo-Com TV thing. The CIA had stepped aside. Hawk made a deal with them—he would take care of Phelan. the albatross around their neck. He would see to it that Phelan died a very quiet death in a far place and never came back to haunt the CIA. With me as the executioner.

Phelan was getting nervous. So was I. It was stalemate now but it couldn't last. Somebody had to make a move.

I tried again: "So they want you killed down here? So cross them up. I'll take you back personally and I promise that nothing will happen to you on the way. You can stand trial in Washington and make monkeys out of the CIA."

Out of Hawk, too. He would hate my guts for it. He had promised a job—a job that I was to deliver, and he would have to eat plenty of crow if I didn't come through.

"Come on," I said. "Give up and let's get going. I want to see the look on my boss's face when I bring you out of here alive."

Phelan waited a long time to answer. He laughed and it sounded saner. And sadder.

"No, Carter. I couldn't face a trial myself. I'm too tired, too exhausted and beat-up. I've been intending to commit suicide, but I kept putting it off. That is something else I'm learning at first hand—it isn't easy to make a final decision to die."

I could have told him that.

He moved the rifle again. It rasped on the little altar. I wondered

how good a shot he was. Up to now, by his own admission, he had been a desk murderer, like Hawk, and maybe he was lousy. I would have to test that pretty soon.

All the time I was searching the gloom, trying to find a place to hide when the ceiling and walls started coming down.

Phelan sighed. A deep, gasping sound. "Strange," he said. "I've been trying to kill you for three years and this is only the second time I've met you face to face."

His laugh was sharp, a barking sound. "When I went to meet you in Los Angeles that day with Hawk, I didn't know what to expect. Maybe horns. You've got the luck of the devil. But I almost had you in Beirut."

I thought back. "That was you—your planning—in Tangier? The taxi that nearly got me?"

"Yes. And the sniper in London. The knife fight in Paris. All of them failures."

"I should be flattered," I said. "All that attention! They must have a real thing about me in Moscow."

"You're an obsession with them, Carter! An absolute obsession. That's why if I kill you now and take proof back to Moscow, I'll be given a hero's welcome. They'll give me a job and a pension. In spite of the fact that I have bungled everything of late."

"Then shoot me," I sneered. I held up the detonator disc. "Shoot me, Phelan, and take your chances."

I saw him shake his head slowly.

"I—I just don't know. I really don't think I would like it in Russia. And I'm tired. Very tired."

He was manic-depressive. I knew it and I knew he wasn't going to kill himself. He was talking himself out of it. He was a talker, not a doer, when it came to the suicide bit and that meant I had only a few seconds. He was coming out of depression and swinging into the manic cycle. Pretty soon everything would look rosy again.

My thinking was confirmed by the subtle change in his tone. I couldn't see his finger tensing on the trigger. I felt it.

"One final thing," he said. "You must know this, Carter, and believe it. I had nothing to do with the way the Kilbride girl was killed. That was all Hermes' idea. He was a pervert, you know. His orders were simply to kill you both and burn your bodies in that old house. I—"

I pressed the detonation button on the disc. I made a long dive for the shelter of the big altar. Phelan got in one shot, because the slug branded me lightly on the neck, but I never heard the rifle sound. All I heard was the sound of the sky falling. The doors of hell opened, and an insane clamoring wind surged through the world.

I grabbed for Hermes' body and pulled it down on top of me as I flung myself at the base of the altar. It wasn't much, it wasn't anything in that crazy Niagara of falling stone, and yet it saved my life. A hunk of granite the size of a wash basin crashed his head instead of mine. A long sliver of stone, a couple of tons of it, bounced right over the altar and me. The altar swayed on its base and started to topple. I got out from under and ran for the small altar where Phelan had been. The floor was cracked and crumbling, but still holding. The ceiling was slow in coming down, bit by bit, slab by slab. Everything was dust and smoke and then the back-draft came and engulfed me in a howling fury, a vortex of black air and stone shards.

No sign of Phelan. I vaulted the little altar and saw the opening in the floor. The trap he had mentioned. By some miracle a light was still burning down there.

Right over me the entire ceiling let go in delayed fall as the key stones gave way. I went through the trap feet-first and just made it as a hundred odd tons of rock covered it.

I fell ten feet and ruined an ankle. I had no time for pain. It was a big chamber, with a generator still humming in one corner, and an instrument console near it. It was here that Phelan had watched me on the scanner and controlled the doors.

Over me the avalanche sound kept growing as more and more walls came tumbling down. I didn't give Li Tzu and his people much of a chance as I ran for a door on the far side of the chamber. It was the only way out. The way Bill Phelan must have gone.

Then there was no way out. I had barely stepped into the passage when half of it caved in. Somewhere close to me a man screamed. The lights went out and blackness came down as the fall smashed the generator.

I used my pen flash. It was feeble in the suffocating musty, stone and dust-laden darkness. I had the Luger ready, and the stiletto. The crashing was going away from me now, working down toward the moat, and I thought the worst was over. With me still alive. Getting out was another matter.

The whimpering led me to him. The fall had gotten him halfway down the passage. He was on his back, with only his face and part of his upper chest exposed. He kept whimpering and crying. My light picked up his bald head first, with the fringe of red hair, then the blood gushing from his mouth. He was in terrible agony, but his eyes were lucid and I could understand him.

"Shoot me!" His eyes begged me. "I—uhhhhhh—oh God—oh God—kill me! I can't stand this—"

I would want someone to do it for me. I shot him through the head.

Chapter 12

It took them two days to dig me out. A lot longer than it took Hawk and me to jet back to Washington. I spent a day in the hospital while they did some minor patching and shot me full of vitamins.

None of the others made it off the crag. I hoped that Li Tzu and his devotees had found peace at last. The Neo-Coms were as finished as the TV transmitter.

The Russians were fast to goof out. A Neo-Communist China, one they could, control, a puppet, would have been nice in the United Nations. That would solve a lot of problems and the Ivans could get back to bugging us again. But it wasn't worth taking big risks for, and Russian headaches in Eastern Europe were taking precedence at the moment.

A lot of people and money down the drain. The way the world is today only the money was important... .

We sat in Hawk's office and I listened to him in silence. I was plenty teed with him and he knew it. He should have told me about Phelan from the very beginning.

"I couldn't," he said. "I couldn't tell you, son, because that first day in Los Angeles I still wasn't a hundred-percent sure about Phelan. Only ninety-nine percent. The important thing was to get you down there to blow that transmitter! That took first priority. Over everything."

I scowled at him through cigarette smoke. "But you wouldn't fly me into Cuzco. You made me trek in. Five hundred miles in the Toyota."

"I know, boy, I know. I needed that time to start Phelan running. I had to shake him loose, scare him, bug him into making a break for it. I had been after Phelan for some time without much luck. He wouldn't panic, and I couldn't prove anything. Then the Neo-Com thing broke in Peru, and the trail started in LA. Right in Hollywood. That was Phelan's territory and he had to be In charge of CIA activities there. It was the chance I'd been waiting for. I went to the Director and told him he had a Red plant in a high spot. I convinced him, and then I was in the driver's seat." The old man smiled and chuckled. "In fact it was the Director himself who suggested to the President that AXE handle the case."

Where AXE was concerned Hawk is amoral.

I pointed my cigarette at him. "You said you weren't sure about Phelan. So how did you get the Director to play ball? I wouldn't exactly call him an admirer of yours."

"So I exaggerated a little. I let the Director think I was sure—that I

had positive proof.”

“Didn’t he ask to see the proof?”

Hawk took a cigar from a box on the desk. “He did. I wouldn’t show it to him. Secret AXE files, you know. I promised that Phelan would break and run and that would be proof enough.”

“Suppose he hadn’t broken? Suppose he kept his nerve and bluffed it out?”

He clamped his false teeth down on the cigar. “Disaster, son. Pure disaster. But he did.”

I said, “You told Phelan that I was going to jeep in? So he would know that he could get to the crag before me?”

“Naturally. He was afraid of you, Nick. His job was to kill you and he had been flunking it all along. He knew you would come to the crag and that he would have to face you. The more time he had to think about that the worse his nerves would get. He did try to run, you know. He got to Cuzco, in a lousy homemade disguise, but I had men there and let them show themselves and he lost his nerve again and took the helicopter back to the crag.”

I said I knew. I had seen him come back. Then, because I wanted to see the expression on Hawk’s face, I said: “You could have taken him in Cuzco. He had broken and run. Your point was made. Why did you let him go back to the crag?” As if I didn’t know.

Hawk was patient with me. “You know that, Nick, as well as I do. Part of my deal with the CIA was that we kill Phelan out of the United States, quietly, so they wouldn’t be embarrassed.”

“I know you threw me in a shark pool without a life preserver. Suppose I had trusted Phelan? Gotten shot in the back?”

He shook his head. “I knew that wouldn’t happen, boy. Phelan had no business on the crag, and you would know it. Never for an instant did I think you were in any danger from Phelan—I knew you could handle it.”

“In the future,” I told him, “I wish you would try not to be so damned devious. I know it’s probably hopeless—but try. Let me know what is really going on.”

“I mostly do,” he said sweetly. “You know I do. This time I couldn’t. It was too complex and would only have distracted you. The real job was to blow that transmitter. Money, you know. All those TV dollars. All that pressure on the government.”

I got up to leave. “That was the real job, I know, but it didn’t pay the real dividends, did it? Like saving CIA’s face and being able to blackmail them for anything you want from now on.”

Hawk had a horrified look on his face. “Blackmail! That’s a terrible word, son. A terrible word!”

“I think it fits,” I said grimly as I headed for the door. When I got

there I turned back. "How did you get onto Phelan in the first place?"

He pursed his lips and considered me over the unlit cigar. "You sure you want to know, son? Considering the way you feel at the moment?"

"I'm sure. I want to know."

"The Kilbride girl," Hawk said. "She was my girl. I planted her in the CIA, on Phelan, some time ago. She made a mistake—I don't know what it was—and Phelan found out she was a plant. She didn't know that he knew, and neither did I. Not until he had Hermes kill her. Along with you. He was trying to kill two birds with one stone that night."

I stared at him, scratching the stubble on my chin with a finger. Pat Kilbride. I could remember that schoolgirl kiss. Yet she had been AXE all along, posing as CIA. Hawk doesn't use schoolgirls.

I kept feeling her moist lips on my cheek. Peter Pan. Hawk kept talking.

"Phelan was an old, sad story. There is a syndrome and I spotted it. Phelan was weak. An intellectual, though he put up a tough front. He had a wife in a mental institution and three kids in expensive schools. He always needed money and they got to him. He hated himself. He would have committed suicide sooner or later."

I nodded. "But that wouldn't have done you any good. Or AXE."

He was honestly puzzled. "Of course not. How could it?"

As I was going out the door he said: "Nick. Look at it this way—by killing Phelan the way you did—or I did, say—look how much grief we have saved his kids and wife. They'll never know the truth. He died on a mission in the performance of his duty. What's wrong with that?"

Nothing that I could see. "I didn't kill him," I said. "The old temple did."

He was smiling again. "Of course. The Incas killed him. Their stones."

"Goodbye," I said. "I've got some leave coming. I think I'll go out and get drunk."

I knew I wouldn't, but it sounded like a good idea.

He waved his old farmer's hand at me and smiled. "You aren't really angry, Nick?"

"I don't know yet." I was starting to get over it, to see his side, but to hell with letting him know it.

The smile was still there, but his gray eyes were cold. "You always have carte blanche on your missions, Nick. You ask for it, and I never ask you too many questions. Results are what count. That carte blanche works two ways, son. We got the results. Don't ask me any more questions about this thing. Right?"

“Right.”

Delia Stokes nodded to me as I went through the outer office. The intercom on her desk buzzed and she answered it and his voice said: “Send Nick back a moment, Delia.”

I went back. Hawk was holding a flimsy in his hand. He squinted at me and waved the paper.

“You know a woman named Kezia Newmann? A double. Worked for Shin Bet and the Russians?”

I nodded. “I know her. What about her?”

He didn’t look at me. He looked at the piece of paper in his hand.

“They pulled her body out of the Sea of Galilee yesterday. She was staying at a resort hotel in Tiberius.”

“Why tell me about it?”

He smiled and waved. “Goodbye, son. Take it easy and report back in two weeks. There’s a little something I Want you to look into.”

As I went down in the elevator I wondered who had killed Kezia Newmann. Shin Bet or the Russians? I hoped it hadn’t been the Russians. Not Nikolay Tovaretz with those big hands.